

HISTORY THROUGH CHILDREN'S WRITING

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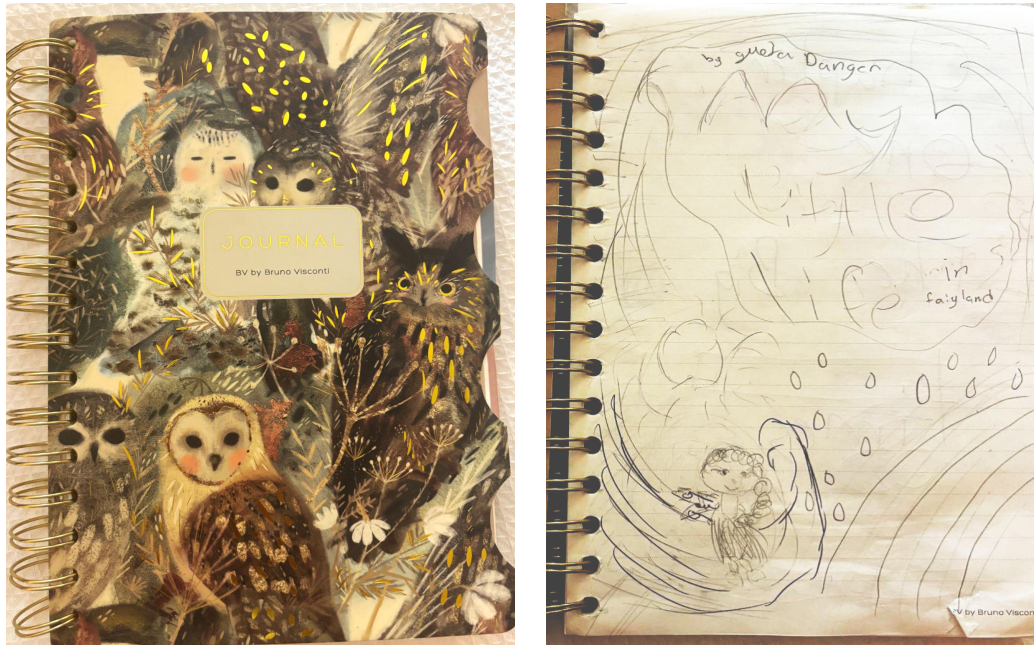
FRAGMENTS of youth writing do not simply appear; they find their way—sometimes long after their creation—into the hands of various audiences (readers, editors, collectors, publishers), where meaning is created through shifting interpretive lenses. These texts arrive marked as much by absence as by presence—not only shaped by what has been preserved, but also by what has been lost, overlooked, or filtered. The conditions of their survival are never neutral. This paper asks what is revealed when we take seriously the fragmentary, time-bound nature of youth writing: its composition within fleeting developmental stages, its mediation through adult frameworks, and the material and cultural forces that govern how it is produced, preserved, or forgotten. In attending to these layers, I am less concerned with pinning down fixed values or qualities of youth-authored texts as *static artifacts*. Rather, when read through the entangled conditions of their creation—developmental, institutional, material, and cultural—youth-authored texts resurface as dynamic, time-bound (and time-bending) *embodied acts of authorship*. Reading youth-authored texts as *acts* rather than *artifacts* challenges us to move beyond recovering what youth writing *is*, toward understanding what it *does*: how it registers and resists the forces that shape it, and how it invites us to reconceptualise authorship itself as a temporally situated, embodied, and relational act.

I begin with an example close to home. Recently, while packing my bags for a conference, I reached for a journal that I had purchased on a family trip to Massachusetts. Expecting to inscribe my name on what I assumed was a blank notebook, I was surprised to discover that my eight-year-old daughter, Greta, had beaten me to the punch (Figs. 1 and 2). Inside the blank book, she had designed an elaborate title page, illustrations, and the opening paragraph of her own “fairy tale.” Despite knowing Greta intimately well—and knowing that I had purchased the journal just eight weeks prior—I had no idea when she wrote the story or exactly what inspired the tale. Greta has always been a storyteller. And yet, just two and a half years ago, as a five-year-old, she detested writing. She would cry at night about being

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sentenced by her kindergarten teacher to produce whole sentences. Now, at eight, she fills random notebooks from my desk with stories, including Chapter One: “The Big Times” (Fig. 3).



Figures 1 and 2. *My Little Life in Fairyland* (Fig. 1, left), and title page (Fig. 2, right), by Greta Danger, journal, purchased March 2025 (photographs by Sara R. Danger).

These recent shifts in Greta’s writing bring to mind scholar Sarah Mazza’s point that “what defines childhood as a historical category [even more than age]—is time” (1271). In contrast to any other “category of human identity,” childhood is defined, Maza argues, by its temporality, its impermanence. Because of the transient nature of childhood, Maza further contends that children’s activities from the past are best conceptualised not as agency but as performance (1271).

It was this framing—the relationship between time and childhood—that Greta’s writing unexpectedly illuminated for me. Her “found” story exemplifies her significant transformation from resisting writing to embracing it. These changes, on the one hand, reflect the passage of time. Like all human persons, Greta is not the same today as she was two years ago. On the other hand, in this small notebook, Greta has constructed her own imaginative space and narrative voice that would have been impossible for her to write two years ago. Her playful story arc and material reproductions of the codex features of printed book publishing (in the title page, chapter titles, and illustrations) highlight the profound ways that her changing socio-cognitive development influences creative expression. The difference between the writing practices of a five-year-old and those of an eight-year-old can be profound, and Greta’s story vividly illustrates how those developmental dynamics surface in the

act of composition. In witnessing this transformation, I began to consider how time functions not just as a marker of growth but as an active dimension within which young authors create meaning.

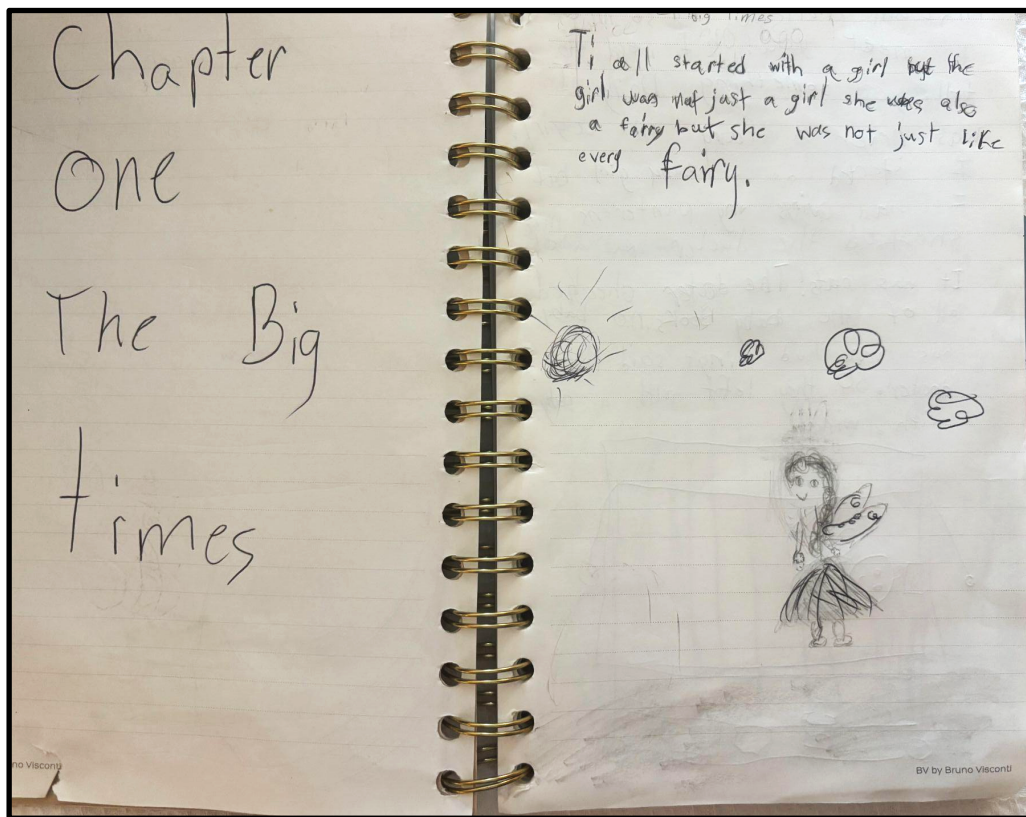


Figure 3. "The Big Times," by Greta Danger, ch. 1 of *My Little Life in Fairyland*, journal, purchased March 2025 (photograph by Sara R. Danger).

My Little Life in Fairyland by Greta Danger, after all, is not merely a performance of storytelling but an enactment of narrative agency.¹ The choices Greta makes in both the material and formal dimensions of storytelling are time-bound and dynamic. While she titles her story *My Little Life in Fairyland* on one page, she begins the first chapter with the title "The Big Times." Her striking and contradictory juxtapositions (e.g., "little life" and "big times") exploit the instability and complexity of language. Continuing this dynamic, the introduction to the story's protagonist reads, "The girl was not just a girl, but also a fairy, but she was not just like every fairy." From the title page, chapter title, to story opening, Greta constructs an imaginative space in which meaning remains deliberately unstable. In doing so, she enacts a shifting relationship through narrative forms and conventions, which foreground her playful authorial inversions and contradictions. Language, sense, and time, created in and by her story

world, underscore how narrative itself is pliable, open to doubling back, reimagining, and resisting closure.

Greta's work reminds us that youth writing should be read not as static or finished, but as a time-bound, embodied engagement with language and culture. This dynamic extends to the reader as well. All readings of literary works, as Wai Chee Dimock argues, "are activated, and to some extent constituted by the passage of time, by their continual transit through new somatic networks, modifying their tonality as they proceed" (1064). As Dimock puts it, a text "can resonate only insofar as it is touched by the effects of its travels" (1064). With Dimock's points in mind, I would like to reconsider the particularities of time, place, self, and culture activating our engagements with youth-authored texts by focusing on two specific archival encounters: first, a fairy tale, which spurred on the central questions of my book project, and finally, a recent encounter with two poetic fragments, which press those questions further.

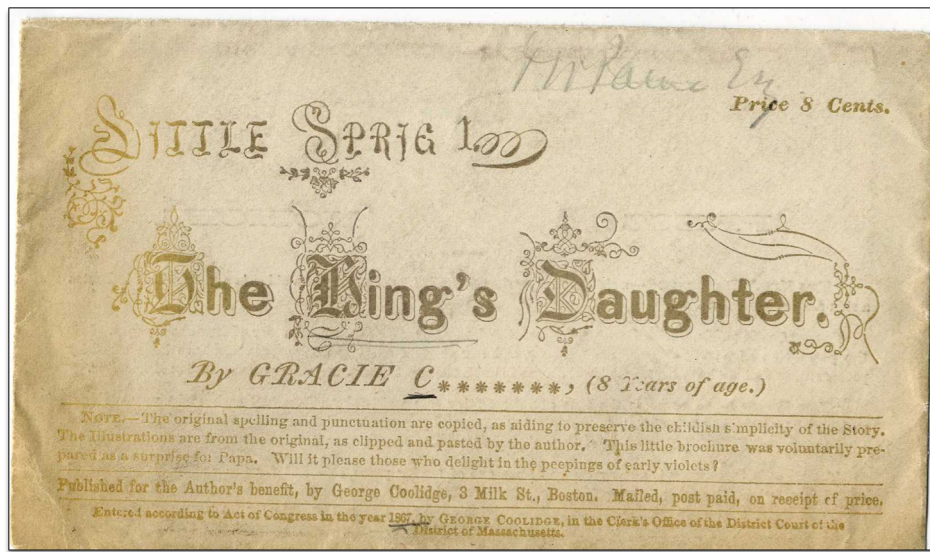


Figure 4. Grace Fisher Coolidge, "The King's Daughter," Boston, George Coolidge, 1867 (Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society).

When I began researching my current book project at the American Antiquarian Society, I was shocked to discover published works by nineteenth-century children, including "The King's Daughter," a fairy tale by Gracie C, aged eight, published by her father in 1867 (Fig. 4). Enclosed in a small paper envelope that fits nicely in the palm of the reader's hand, "The King's Daughter" is a tiny text. Measuring eight by fifteen centimetres, the miniature book consists of four pages of text and two illustrations. Accentuating its uniqueness, the envelope/title page credits the authorship of the small book to "Gracie C***** (eight years of age)." Below the title, we are told by an adult editorial voice that "the original spelling and punctuation are

copied, as aiding to preserve the childish simplicity of the story.” We also learn that Coolidge’s text includes illustrations “clipped and pasted by the [child] author” and composed “voluntarily ... as a surprise for Papa.” The publication information covering the envelope makes it clear that Gracie’s text would not exist (at least in published form) without adult intervention and appropriation. “Papa” turns out to be the book’s publisher, George Coolidge, a well-known Boston job printer of almanacs and gift books. The back of the envelope reprints numerous newspaper reviews of Grace’s little tale (still more evidence of her father’s publishing connections).



Figures 5 and 6. Grace Fisher Coolidge, “The King’s Daughter,” Boston, George Coolidge, 1867 (Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society).

Once removed from its ornate wrappings, Gracie’s fairy tale reveals itself as both conventional—centred on a princess who needs rescue—and subversive. It ends not with marriage but with the prince “winning [*sic*]” the princess. They live on, we are told, but not in wedded bliss. Their survival depends, as it so rarely does in once-upon-a-time-time, on their remaining side by side, alive but still unbound by the legal constraints of marriage. This final gesture toward autonomy finds confirmation in the

illustrations framing the text. Both feature a girl alone, first with a doll and at the end on her knees as if in prayer (Figs. 5 and 6). The lone girls flanking the text (which were “selected” by the young author, according to the title page, and were most likely drawn from generic stock images her publisher-father Coolidge had on hand), visually affirm that this is not the traditional girl’s need in a fairytale for a boy to rescue her. Gracie’s romp in “once upon a time-time” offers a different kind of story. A girl with a doll and poised in prayer, conventional though they might first seem, also gestures toward self-initiated actions. They suggest a “happily ever after” found in girls’ own imagination, play, and spirituality, like that represented by the text itself. Instead of ending with a wedding scene, marriage is not presented as the culmination of the tale or the life of the girl.

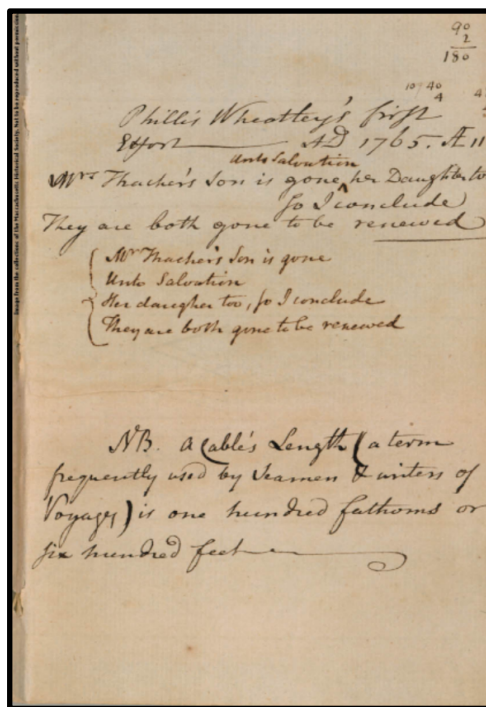
The questions raised by this text are manifold. Who is Gracie Coolidge, and what led her to compose such a tale? If, as the envelope declares, the story was “voluntarily” written as a “surprise” for her father, then how should we understand the fact that its publication clearly depended on her adult father’s professional expertise and social connections? What at first appears to be a private act of gift-giving is, in fact, deeply entangled with the public sphere of nineteenth-century print culture.

The publication of Gracie’s original tale—authored by an eight-year-old girl, printed by her father, and accompanied by contemporary newspaper reviews—underscores the nineteenth-century cultural impulse to preserve and display children’s writing. These modes of production, moreover, instantiate the ambiguities embedded in that impulse: was it a celebration of child creativity or a patronising or domesticated form of it, made legible and palatable through adult framing? These tensions highlight the historical, material, and interpretative complexities of youth-authored texts. To read them critically is not only to consider what young writers express, but also to interrogate the conditions that enable or constrain how their perspectives and the story worlds they create are represented and understood.

These questions about how we read and interpret child authorship (particularly in relation to the temporalities informing human development, historical context, and the mediating forces of the archive) come into even sharper focus with a remarkable archival find: two poetic fragments attributed to Phillis Wheatley, reportedly composed when she was just eleven years old in the year 1765 (Fig. 7). These texts, which were found in the 1773 diary of Jeremy Belknap, a Congregationalist minister who would later write *The History of New Hampshire* (1784) and become the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, offer a rare glimpse into the early literary development of one of the most significant poets of the eighteenth century (Fig. 7). Additionally, they foreground the broader challenges of accessing and contextualising children’s voices in historical records shaped by adult mediators and institutional frameworks.

Except for Wheatley’s astonishing poetic fragments (transcribed in Fig. 7), Belknap’s diary is a utilitarian document. It contains maps, household recipes, lists of

the ordained and the recently deceased. In the four years of annuals that I had the opportunity to look through at the Massachusetts Historical Society, no other hymns, sermons, or spiritual reflections—nothing literary besides Wheatley's juvenilia—appeared. Interestingly, Vincent Carretta, who initially discovered the poetic fragment, offers no record of Belknap having met Wheatley. Carretta suggests that Belknap's uncle, Reverend Mather Byles (1707–1788), who lived in Boston, may have been the source for the transcription (Carretta 48–49). Belknap may have met Wheatley in 1775 while accompanying troops around Boston as a wartime chaplain, but that happened two years after he recorded Wheatley's verses.² Yet somehow, two years prior, in the midst of his clerical and logistical entries, Wheatley's verses (which had first been recorded seven years earlier) appeared quietly, insistently—and transcribed twice.



Phillis Wheatley's first Effort AD 1765 Æ 11.
 Mrs Thacher's Son is gone Unto Salvation her Daughter too
 so I conclude
 They are both gone to be renewed
 Mr [Mrs.] Thacher's Son is gone Unto Salvation
 Her daughter too, so I conclude
 They are both gone to be renewed

NB. A cable's Length (a term frequently used by seamen & writers of Voyages) is one hundred fathoms or six hundred feet.

Figure 7. Two poetic fragments by Phillis Wheatley (image and transcription), in Jeremy Belknap, diary for 1773 (Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston).

I am in the early stages of making sense of these remarkable fragments. One set of questions they raise concerns their provenance. The significance of these poems attributed to Phillis Wheatley, arguably the most prominent early American poet, an enslaved Black girl who composed her most famous work between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, clearly shapes both their initial preservation and the excitement surrounding their recent rediscovery. Yet their very findability—embedded in the diary of a white Congregationalist minister, recorded in his handwriting, preserved in

the archive he would later establish—is itself a revealing circumstance. That these poems gained near-instant scholarly credibility after Vincent Carretta rediscovered and published them about a decade ago adds yet another layer to the story (50–53).

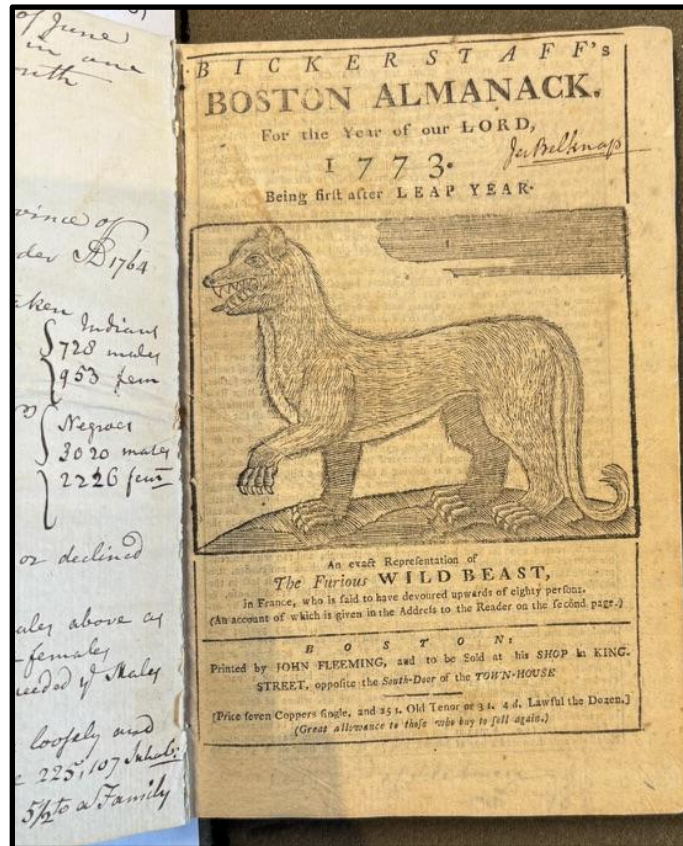


Figure 8. Jeremy Belknap, diary for 1773 (Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, photograph by Sara R. Danger).

The relative ease with which these fragments were celebrated by contemporary scholars calls for reflection, especially when juxtaposed with the historical reality of Wheatley’s own life. The contrast between the preservation of Belknap’s notebooks and the enthusiastic reception of Carretta’s claims, on one hand, and Wheatley’s own need to defend her authorship before a tribunal of prominent white Bostonians in 1772, on the other, is stark. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. powerfully recounts in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Wheatley’s literary legitimacy had to be publicly affirmed by a tribunal of prominent white male Bostonians, an ordeal these fragments, ironically mediated and authenticated by white institutional forces, never had to endure (“Phillis”). It is also striking to consider that Belknap recorded Wheatley’s early poetic efforts (from seven years prior) in an almanac dating to nearly the same year in which her authorship had been questioned. This coincidence—Wheatley’s earliest creative

labour being deemed noteworthy even as her legitimacy as an author was officially contested—signals more than a historical overlap. It speaks to the undeniable power of young Wheatley's words and the cultural impact of her authorship, despite the desire by some to question it.

This disparity—between the instant authority conferred on scholarly mediation by Carretta and the skepticism Wheatley herself endured—exposes the deeper stakes of periodicity. The conditions under which youth-authored texts are composed, preserved, or erased are not neutral. They are political, racialised, gendered, and ideological. Who gets to write? What is preserved? Who is believed? As these questions make clear, we must expand our critical frameworks to account for writing by youth that challenge our assumptions about agency, intention, and authority; for instance, poems like Wheatley's early fragments, which may have been written under constraint, recorded by someone else, and yet still bear the marks of creative expression, theological reflection, witty puns, and literary ambition.

To engage with Wheatley's "earliest" poem recorded in a white minister's daily journal is not an act of simple recovery, to say the least. By raising this point and the examples above, however, I am not implying that our goal is to "excavate" or "extract" from fraught layers of textual production, editing, and history (whether encasing this fragmentary poem attributed to Wheatley or any other text by a youth author), some definitive "origin point" or universal values of what matters most about or in child-authored texts. Rather, I am most interested in what it means when we reclaim, study, and interpret youth-produced texts as *acts of writing*, which expose and espouse the *temporal dimensions* inherent in both the creation and reception of youth composition. What we find in texts like Greta Danger's manuscript, Gracie Coolidge's subversive fairy tale, or poetic fragments attributed to young Phillis Wheatley are never pure, timeless sites of youthful creativity; instead, they offer fleeting, time-bound glimpses into how particular authors *in their youth* created meaning from within and about the specific cultural, historical, and rhetorical matrices of their time and place. Tending to these multiple contexts of periodicity—developmental, historical, archival, and interpretive—allows us to see children's writing not as fixed or finished, but as living (constructive and constructed) records of thought, feeling, constraint, and possibility.

NOTES

¹While Maza calls for historians to think of *history through children* rather than reconstructing an isolated *history of children*, she remains cautious about attributing direct agency to children's own words and actions. For Maza, children are always in relation to adults, and thus their voices are often read as mediated, shaped by adult scripts, or constrained by cultural expectations. Her emphasis on "performance" underscores the difficulty of separating authentic child experience from the discursive frameworks imposed upon them.

My argument departs from this position by insisting that children's writing itself provides evidence of rhetorical and historical agency. To treat such texts only as performances of adult scripts risks flattening the ways children strategically negotiate their social worlds. Even when borrowing language, forms, or genres modeled by adults, children make choices—choices that can reshape meaning, resist authority, or carve out space for self-expression. Where Maza stresses the fluidity and impermanence of childhood as a category, I argue that precisely in this fluidity we can see children experimenting with identity, testing voices, and exercising agency.

² Jeremy Belknap (1637-1891). Collection Guide, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0246?utm>.

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