

Reimagining Sponsorship: Recovery Work, Institutional Sponsorship, and the Nearly Forgotten Rev. Mary A. Will

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Abstract: This article forwards a framework of *institutional sponsorship*, a recovery methodology designed for historical figures that have eluded existing recovery efforts. Grounded in Brandt's concept of sponsorship, institutional sponsorship is an analytical framework that is not entirely dependent upon a figure's words but rather locates a historical figure's rhetorical presence through their relationship with an institution. Institutional sponsorship employs a three-pronged approach: embracing ephemeral evidence, exploring power dynamics, and analyzing the reciprocal impact between the figure and institution. This model is illustrated with Rev. Mary Will, a nineteenth-century clergywoman who, despite her unique and tumultuous career, has been nearly forgotten.

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Epigraph

"We pray the Lord of the harvest, that he may send laborers into his harvest, that are not afraid to unite their labors with that of a woman."

—Rev. Mary A. Will, *The American Wesleyan*, 20 February 1861

"We are glad to say, that our church never has been so well governed under any pastor, as it has been under sister Will. We think it can no longer be said, that a church cannot be well governed by a woman. There never was a mother who watched over an infant with greater interest, than sister Will has over this church."

—S.A. Stock, *The American Wesleyan*, 12 June 1861

"Resolved, that the action of ... ordaining a female was unscriptural."

—Wesleyan Methodist Connection, "Book of Minutes," June 1864

"Resolved, that the action of ... deposing sister M. A. Will was irregular and illegal."

—Wesleyan Methodist Connection, "Book of Minutes," October 1875

Introduction

In 1994 when Cheryl Glenn published “Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric,” she called for feminist historians of rhetoric to “re-map” rhetorical history by writing women into the rhetorical canon (180). Glenn went on to offer a first step in this feminist challenge to the history of rhetoric by arguing for the inclusion of Aspasia of Miletus—a contemporary of Socrates, Plato, Pericles, and other classical figures—in the rhetorical canon. No primary sources from Aspasia have survived, but Glenn nonetheless reconstructs her life and rhetorical impact through secondary and tertiary sources, drawing a parallel between the credibility of recovery work on Aspasia and that of Socrates: “We know about Aspasia much the same way we know about Socrates: from secondary sources, for neither of their work exists in primary sources” (182). Soon after, Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong published “Aspasia: Rhetoric, Gender, and Colonial Ideology,” which employs similar recovery methods to consider Aspasia’s role as a Sophist and argue that “she marks the intersection of discourses on gender and colonialism, production and reproduction, rhetoric and philosophy”—making Aspasia a figure of “profound importance” for historical scholarship (10). Since then, feminist scholars in the history of rhetoric have continued to advance recovery efforts and made incredible strides in writing women and other traditionally disenfranchised groups into the rhetorical tradition, and more possibilities for recovery work remain.

Yet, there is still more work to be done. Existing recovery efforts have largely focused on historical figures for whom secondary or tertiary accounts exist, meaning some historical figures remain elusive because we have so little or no account of the figure’s words. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch would refer to these figures as “*silhouetted*, if not altogether invisible, historical figures” (“Social Circulation” 175, emphasis in original). While silhouetted figures are everywhere to be found, the rhetorical tradition of preaching is rife with such silhouetted figures, particularly women preachers. Those women preachers who have entered the public consciousness and have crept into the rhetorical canon—women like Phoebe Palmer and Frances Willard—do so because of the relative celebrity they enjoyed as advocates for women during their careers. The higher cultural visibility that women preachers like Palmer and Willard attained led to the preservation of their sermons, letters, and other primary source materials that would enable future scholars to study and analyze their rhetorical impact. But what about the other women preachers, those who were less noticeable but no less significant? Women like Rev. Mary A. Will, a nineteenth-century Wesleyan-Methodist clergywoman in Illinois and the first known woman to be ordained, deposed, and then restored to ministry? Attempts to study and analyze Will via existing recovery methodologies have been unsuccessful because so few of her words were preserved, leaving very few primary, secondary, or tertiary accounts behind for analysis. This dearth of evidence surrounding Will reveals the need for expanded recovery efforts. Will and women preachers like her have shaped the communities around them and kept the tradition of women preachers alive for centuries, but most have been largely forgotten and have become silhouetted figures.

Recognizing the need to recover silhouetted figures and other marginalized voices, Nan Johnson issued a challenge to feminist scholars in the history of rhetoric in her introduction to *Peitho's* 2015 celebratory issue: “how can we widen the view even further?” (15). Johnson’s call is a recognition of both the incredible work feminist historiographers have done to recover marginalized voices over the past few decades and the need for even more innovative means to recover and elevate women’s voices in the rhetorical tradition.

This article responds to Johnson’s call by forwarding a new framework of *institutional sponsorship*, a recovery methodology that is not entirely dependent upon a figure’s words. By reimagining Deborah Brandt’s notion of sponsorship through a feminist rhetorical lens, institutional sponsorship emerges an analytical framework that locates a silhouetted historical figure’s rhetorical presence through their relationship with the institution(s) surrounding their lives and careers. In forwarding the institutional sponsorship framework, I have two primary objectives. First, I hope to invigorate further conversations about the utility of sponsorship for wider application in feminist rhetorical scholarship. Second, I aim to theorize and demonstrate institutional sponsorship as one such application that serves as a method for recovering marginalized voices.

The institutional sponsorship framework employs a three-pronged approach to map and locate a silhouetted figure’s presence: embracing the ephemeral evidence pertaining to the figure, exploring the power dynamics between the figure and the institution, and analyzing the reciprocal impact between the figure and the institution. I begin by contextualizing institutional sponsorship in existing literature and then explain and illustrate the three-pronged framework with Rev. Mary A. Will. Even though Will had a unique and tumultuous career as a clergywoman in nineteenth-century America, she has been almost completely overlooked in the tradition of Methodist women preachers. My attempts to study and analyze Will via existing recovery methodologies were unsuccessful and revealed the need for this new institutional sponsorship framework, as Will left very few words behind and only glimpses of her have survived in traditional archives. Despite the scarcity of primary, secondary, and tertiary accounts that have survived Will, I use institutional sponsorship to analyze Will’s relationship with her denomination and demonstrate how Will’s rhetorical presence shaped the Wesleyan Methodist legacy of women’s ordination.

Toward a Feminist Rhetorical View of Sponsorship

In their chapter in Laurie Gries and Collin Gifford Brooke’s *Circulation, Writing, and Rhetoric*, Royster and Kirsch call for the deployment of social circulation in our digital age to encourage a new type of analysis. Social circulation, as explained by Royster and Kirsch, is a feminist rhetorical practice that “invokes connections among past, present, and future in the sense that the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (*Feminist* 23). Analysis grounded in social circulation, then, looks for impact that ripples across time and may transcend

the boundaries of traditional archives. As Royster and Kirsch explain,

This type of analysis helps us reach for new interpretive paradigms for *silhouetted*, if not altogether invisible, historical figures and locate a rhetorical presence, rather than absence, for them at the convergence of images, texts, forms, formats, and perspectives. At this convergence we gain a capacity to create a social historiography, a mapping of visibility, and a sense of mobility within social space as we learn to narrate consequence, impact, and achievement in a more fully textured way. (“Social Circulation” 175, emphasis in original)

I suggest that reimagining sponsorship as an interpretive paradigm that stems from social circulation offers new possibilities for mapping the visibility of marginalized and silhouetted voices.

Such a reimagination is already in close alignment with Deborah Brandt’s original conception of sponsorship. When Brandt first published “Sponsors of Literacy” in 1998, she was addressing the need to move beyond a narrow focus on individual literacy development and examine how an individual’s development was shaped and influenced by larger, systemic forces. Brandt formally defines sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (“Sponsors” 166). Brandt expands her exploration of sponsorship relationships in her 2001 book *Literacy in American Lives*, and commenting further on the nature of sponsorship, she explains:

Sponsors are embodied in the materials of reading and writing, the institutional aegis and rationales under which learning is carried out, the histories by which practices arrive at the scenes of learning, the causes to which teachers and learners put their efforts, and the advantages, both direct and indirect, that stand to be won by the sponsors themselves. ...Sponsors can be benefactors but also extortionists—and sometimes both in the same form. (*Literacy* 193)

Put another way, sponsorship relationships are complex and nuanced. Sponsors possess power and exert ideological pressure, and a sponsor’s impact upon the sponsored may be helpful, harmful, or both. By analyzing sponsorship relationships scholars can locate those connections across time and space that Royster and Kirsch’s practice of social circulation calls us to look for and examine.

Brandt further describes sponsorship as a way to expose the “[a]ccumulated layers” of influences that comprise the “deeply textured history” of literacy, making it a framework that not only withstands but embraces complexity and nuance (“Sponsors” 178). Rhetorical ecologies are

rife with complexity and nuance, and when we reimagine sponsorship through the feminist rhetorical lens of social circulation it becomes a means of analyzing that “convergence” of sources that Royster and Kirsch envision to surround silhouetted figures (“Social Circulation” 175).

Since its publication, Brandt’s sponsorship framework has been widely applied to study literacy in a variety of contexts, from Bump Halbritter and Julie Lindquist’s methodology for operationalizing discovery in scenes of literacy sponsorship to Dale Jacobs’ study of Marvel comics as sponsors of multimodal literacy.¹ The complexity of these sponsorship relationships and the variety of research sites and subjects put forth by Brandt and many others in her wake serve as proof of the appeal and utility of sponsorship as an analytical framework, particularly in examining relationships between the sponsor and the sponsored. However, as chronicled by Ann M. Lawrence in her 2015 review of sponsorship literature, subsequent scholars who used Brandt’s study as a model for their own research moved away from this expansive notion of sponsorship and focused only on people as sponsors. New possibilities for analysis and potential rhetorical intervention emerge when we re-engage with Brandt’s original construct through a feminist rhetorical lens, particularly when we consider the “institutional aegises” that Brandt named as a site of sponsorship.

Brandt’s definition of sponsors highlights the importance of looking beyond the individual to the influences that surround them, and this same concern has reverberated throughout feminist rhetorical scholarship. Through her scholarship, Brandt effectively argues that sponsors are “delivery systems” for economies of literacy and that sponsorship is “richly suggestive” as a framework for exploring these economies and their effects (“Sponsors” 167). The feminist reimagination of sponsorship I am calling for not only re-engages with Brandt’s expansive conception of sponsorship but also shifts its lens from economies of literacy to rhetorical ecologies. By using sponsorship to examine rhetorical ecologies and grounding the framework in feminist rhetorical practices, scholars of rhetoric can offer new insights into people, situations, events, and interactions by identifying the sponsors—human or nonhuman, overt or subtle—that possess or exert power in a given rhetorical situation and then examining the relationships between the sponsors and the sponsored. For the present purpose, my interest is in developing an ecological view of the sponsorship relationship between an institution and a silhouetted historical figure. This sponsorship relationship offers feminist scholars in the history of rhetoric a new way to recover silhouetted voices that existing recovery methodologies have not yet been able to access.

1 To gain a broader understanding of the breadth of sponsorship research in literacy studies, see Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher’s study of computer-related literacy in *Literate Lives in the Information Age* (2004); Morris Young’s “Sponsoring Literacy Studies”, in which he explores the sponsors influencing the field of literacy studies itself (2013); Lisa Lebduska’s more troubling look at the relationship between sponsor and sponsored in “Literacy Sponsorship and the Post-9/11 GI Bill” (2014); Lisa Mastrangelo’s “Community Cookbooks: Sponsors of Literacy and Community Identity,” which examines how cookbook authors sponsor their local communities (2015); and Kara Poe Alexander’s theorization of reciprocal sponsorship through relationships that developed between her students and local businesses during a service-learning project in “Reciprocal Literacy Sponsorship in Service-Learning Settings” (2017).

Institutional Sponsorship

Institutional sponsorship, then, is a specific form of rhetorical sponsorship that I define as an analytical framework that examines the relationship between a person and the institution(s) surrounding that person's life and career. The deployment of this institutional sponsorship framework follows a three-pronged approach: embracing ephemeral evidence, examining power dynamics, and analyzing the reciprocal impact the person and the institution had on one another. This methodological reorientation toward institutional sponsorship holds great potential for recovery work in the history of rhetoric. For the remainder of this article, I will demonstrate how a silhouetted figure's presence can be mapped and analyzed through the three-pronged institutional sponsorship framework by offering some brief biographical background and then exploring the sponsorship relationship between the silhouetted historical figure Rev. Mary A. Will and her denomination.

The Nearly Forgotten Rev. Mary A. Will

Rev. Mary A. Will was ordained in 1861 and assumed leadership of the Nora preaching circuit in northern Illinois around that time. A scant three years later in 1864, Will was stripped of her ordination and ministerial credentials on the grounds that ordaining a female was unscriptural. Her case was later brought before the church's General Conference in 1875, at which time Will's deposition was declared "irregular and illegal" and she was (surprisingly) reinstated into ministry. As both a rhetorical scholar and an ordained woman, I believe Will's story is remarkable in both its novelty and complexity. Will navigated predominately male spaces and found both success and opposition, and her story may also help us better understand the struggles other women and marginalized groups face. Yet, despite her unusual ministerial career, Will has remained a silhouetted figure, a mere whisper in the Wesleyan-Methodist archives, and very little about her personal life is known. Will's rhetorical presence can only be recovered and analyzed through the lens of institutional sponsorship.

Will may be nearly forgotten, but her impact upon her denomination—the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America—has rippled throughout subsequent generations. By analyzing the traces of Will that remain through the three-pronged institutional sponsorship framework—embracing ephemeral evidence, examining power dynamics, and analyzing the reciprocal impact—I examine Will's rhetorical presence and consider how Will shaped the Wesleyan Methodist legacy of women's ordination.

Embracing Ephemeral Evidence: Locating Mary Will in the Ripple Effects

While the excellent strides feminist scholars have made in developing recovery methodologies have enabled many marginalized figures to be written into the rhetorical tradition, some figures do not fit into these methodological frameworks because we have minimal or no accounts

of the figure's words. I argue that when we have little or no primary, secondary, or tertiary accounts of a figure's words—as is the case with Mary Will—we can use the institutional sponsorship framework to study the figure's rhetorical impact through the ripple effects the person left upon a given institution. These ripple effects are what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz would call the *ephemera* or “invisible evidence” that is located in intangibles like performance, emotion, and story (10). Ephemera includes “those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself” (10). In other words, ephemera is not the silhouetted figure or direct evidence from the figure but is instead the impact the figure has made upon the institution.

Though the institutional sponsorship framework can certainly be used in contemporary application and analysis, institutional sponsorship is ideal for recovery work because it is *not* a means of examining a figure individually (e.g., a focused analysis of a person's journals or private papers). When a person has left few or no papers, letters, or words behind—either through primary sources or the kinds of secondary and tertiary sources that motivated Glenn's recovery of Aspasia—even established recovery methods are quickly stretched. Institutional sponsorship, by contrast, is less concerned with a dearth of surviving words from a historical figure than with the figure's relationship to a particular institution. And the traces of this relationship are located in the ephemera. Ephemeral evidence of this nature, Muñoz argues, “grants entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories” (9), and institutional sponsorship offers a way to locate a person's rhetorical presence by analyzing and interpreting the ephemeral evidence to reveal the relationship between the person and the institution. This ephemeral lens is useful for analyzing Mary Will because very little traditional evidence remains to offer insight into Mary Will's life and career. Glimpses of Will remain only in government records, minutes from denominational meetings, and a few brief status updates about her church that were published in her denomination's weekly newspaper, *The American Wesleyan*.

Mary Will was ordained by the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America (now known as the Wesleyan Church), a small Methodist denomination that was formed in 1843. The larger Methodist church in the United States was embroiled in a debate over slavery at that time, and the pro-abolition wing of the church branched off and established itself as the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America. In their early days, the Wesleyans had considered themselves “beacons in a darkened world” (Stephens 164). They identified with the radical reformers of their day, fighting for abolition and the promise of a new social order.

This social reform mentality was seen most clearly in 1848 when the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, NY became the site of the first Women's Rights Convention in the country, and ephemeral evidence suggests the possibility that a young Mary Will had a connection with the Seneca Falls congregation. Genealogical records indicate that Mary Will was born in the state of New York in 1821, with her maiden name appearing with the spelling variations “Salsbury” and

“Salisbury” across records. Records from the Chapel in Seneca Falls indicate that a Rev. Samuel Salsbury/Salisbury served as the pastor there from 1843 to 1847 and then again from 1870 to 1872 (National Park Service). Samuel Salsbury/Salisbury was also the president at the 1867 Wesleyan-Methodist General Conference. Surviving evidence can neither confirm nor deny a familial connection between Mary and Samuel—perhaps he was her father, uncle, brother, or other relation—but these ephemeral traces suggest that Mary was likely immersed in the social reform-minded Wesleyan-Methodist community as she grew up and would have been aware of the women’s rights movement that burst to national visibility at Seneca Falls. In 1853, a few years after the Women’s Rights Convention, the founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America, Rev. Luther Lee, presided over the ordination of Antoinette Brown, one of the first women to be ordained in the United States. Less than a decade later, Rev. Mary A. Will was ordained by the Illinois District of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in 1861, making her the first woman to be ordained within the fledgling denomination.

Will’s motivations for entering ministry are unclear, but the ephemera surrounding Will offers some insights. Census records indicate that Will married her husband Henry “H.R.” Will, a Canadian citizen, during her teen years, and gave birth to their two daughters—Sophia and Matilda—while the young family was living in Canada. In 1848 the Wills returned to the US, taking up residence on a farm in Hanover, Cook County, Illinois. By the time of the 1860 census, Mary and H.R.—now empty nesters—had moved roughly 100 miles southwest to the Hennepin Township in Putnam County, Illinois, where H.R.’s profession was listed as a “Wes. Meth. Clergyman.” Denominational records show that both Mary and H.R. were ordained by the regional Illinois Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, and that the Wills relocated to Nora, Illinois in late 1860. Pieced together, census data and denominational records suggest that the Wills entered into ordained ministry and moved to Nora for Mary to take charge of the Wesleyan-Methodist preaching circuit there following the previous pastor’s departure. This move would mean Mary Will was not only the first woman to be ordained but also the first woman to be officially recognized as a pastor and given a pastoral appointment within the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. Put another way, the ephemeral evidence reveals that Will was the first woman to hold a formal leadership position within her institution.

It was a common practice for Wesleyan-Methodist pastors at the time to send periodic updates to the denomination’s newspaper, *The American Wesleyan*, and Mary Will published a few such updates in early 1861. Will’s updates are brief and written with a positive tone, but her update published on February 20, 1861 offers her only surviving reference to the opposition she encountered as a female minister. After recounting some details about her growing ministry in Nora, she concludes with a prayer: “We pray the Lord of the harvest, that he may send laborers into his harvest, that are not afraid to unite their labors with that of a woman, for the harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few” (30). Clearly, Wesleyans had not universally adopted Rev. Luther Lee’s view of women’s ordination, and Will was confronted by people who were reticent

reflective of the complex history of women's ordination in the United States.

Examining Power Dynamics: Mary Will's Pastoral Ethos

The second pillar of institutional sponsorship is an examination of the power dynamics between a person and an institution. Like Brandt's original sponsorship framework, institutional sponsorship is grounded in power. Under Brandt's definition of sponsorship, power is the key characteristic a sponsor possesses, and the sponsor benefits from exercising their power. However, in the institutional sponsorship framework, the power evinced between a person and an institution *may* be more nuanced than a blanket statement that the sponsor possesses power and benefits when that power is exerted. While this imbalanced power dynamic is often true in institutional sponsorship relationships, it is also possible that the power dynamic is more fluid and can shift over time. Institutions generally possess and exert more power than any one person, yet individual people like Mary Will can and have wielded complex and often fraught forms of influence over a wide range of institutions.

The institutional sponsorship approach investigates who was able to exert power in a given situation and how that power was expressed. Sometimes power is overt and visible, and sometimes power is seen through scars left upon the person, the institution, or the surrounding landscape. To explore such power dynamics, the institutional sponsorship framework asks two main questions. First, *Whose accounts and records were preserved and what is missing?* Or, in contemporary application, *Who is allowed to speak and who is silent?* When analyzing a historical figure, power is revealed in the surviving evidence. Institutional sponsorship considers how power dynamics influence which voices, sources, and forms of evidence were preserved and which were disregarded. Institutional sponsorship also examines how power dynamics inform who was granted and who was denied access to publications, platforms, pulpits, and more across various places in time. Second, *What sources of power do individual figures and institutions draw upon?* Institutional sponsorship looks both for traditional, visible forms of overt power (e.g., power to create policies, form governing structures, hold leadership positions) and for non-traditional, more subtle sources of power (e.g., community support, spiritual ethos) that operate within a given rhetorical situation. By wrestling with these questions and tracing power dynamics across time, institutional sponsorship participates in Royster and Kirsch's call for the deployment of social circulation in new forms of analysis. In so doing, institutional sponsorship helps to map the visibility of silhouetted figures and locate their rhetorical presence through the power they exerted and the power exerted upon them.

To begin interrogating the power dynamics between Mary Will and the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, I focus on the power exerted through access to ordination. The Wesleyan Methodist Connection held the power to control and wield access to ordination. The denomination exercised this power over Will by first granting and then revoking her ordination, and they bene-

or unwilling to “unite their labors with that of a woman.” However, the exact nature of the problems she encountered remains unknown. Perhaps the challenge lay with her local congregation, perhaps with the Wesleyan Methodist institutional leadership, or perhaps both. Whatever the case, ephemeral traces indicate that Will’s ordination was revoked three years later.

How and why Will’s ordination was challenged remains unclear, but at the 1864 General Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America, the Illinois Conference’s decision to ordain her was brought under review. The committee that reviewed Will’s ordination declared “that the action of the Illinois Conference in ordaining a female was unscriptural” (209). The General Conference, however, declined to take action following the committee’s resolution and left the matter to the Illinois Conference (Haines and Haines 18). The Illinois Conference soon followed suit and deposed Will from ordained ministry, exerting their institutional power over her. This much is recorded in the official denominational minutes, but details of the conversations and wider debates that surrounded Will’s deposition were not preserved.

Will’s thoughts and actions following her deposition are also unknown. Perhaps she remained at the Nora church, continuing to minister as she had been but with H.R. stepping in as the official pastor. Perhaps she needed some time to recover from the deposition ordeal and left Nora to stay with one of her daughters for some respite. Will disappears from records for a few years following her deposition, and surviving evidence does not indicate if her retreat from visibility was forced or voluntary.

The impact of Will’s ordination and subsequent deposition on her denomination, as seen through these ephemeral traces that remain, is complex. Her deposition came near the end of the American Civil War, a time when many Christian communities—including the Wesleyans—were beginning to experience an identity crisis. As historian Randall J. Stephens observes, “post-war Wesleyans longed for a miraculous, old-time, unadorned faith, free from worldliness and corruption,” and the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the twentieth century marked a period of transition away from their focus on reform to a more conservative outlook that emphasized personal holiness and entire sanctification (169). The result was a loss of the radical hope that had driven the abolitionist reformers, and Wesleyans faded from larger national conversations as they abandoned “the idea that the world could be fundamentally reordered by the cross and through human effort” (Stephens 173). Whereas the Wesleyan-Methodist founder Rev. Luther Lee had advocated for women’s ordination and other reforms with enthusiasm, Mary Will’s generation of Wesleyans had endured a civil war and were struggling to redefine themselves.

By locating Will in and through the ephemera that surrounds her, we see more clearly how her ministerial career was shaped by historical, social, and denominational events both before and during her career. Will is the first of many Wesleyan women who would eventually be ordained in the centuries to come, but her complex relationship with the Wesleyan Methodist Connection is

fitted from their power to control and regulate access to ordination. Later, however, the power of Will's presence would lead the denomination to restore Will's ordination. To examine these power dynamics between Will and the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, I turn to the two guiding questions: Whose accounts and records were preserved and what is missing? What sources of power do individual figures and institutions draw upon?

Discussion of the first question—whose accounts and records were preserved and what is missing?—began in the previous section with the recognition that very few of Mary Will's words have been preserved. No surviving records reveal how Will reacted to her ordination and deposition, and the Wesleyan Methodist newspaper, *The American Wesleyan*, is noticeably silent regarding wider reactions to Will's ordination and deposition. Will also seems to have been denied access to the review of her own ordination. Nothing in the records and minutes from the 1864 General Conference that overturned her ordination indicates that Will was present or invited to contribute to the conversation in any way. Whether Will was intentionally written out of "official" histories or was merely overlooked as not worthy of inclusion in these conversations, these gaps and silences reveal the power that the Wesleyan Methodist Connection exerted over Will.

In response to the second question—what sources of power do individual figures and institutions draw upon?—Will seems to have drawn power from three sources: the ethos of the Methodist woman preacher, the tangible success of her ministry, and her congregation. Will was ordained relatively early in the life of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, a time when the new denomination was still negotiating its institutional identity as distinct from the broader Methodist church it had broken away from. Methodist preacher and theologian Phoebe Palmer was already a well-known figure during Will's time, having published her best-selling book *The Way of Holiness* in 1843, and Will would have had Palmer and other Methodist women preachers to point to as she was beginning her ministerial career. It is possible that Will, in her church context, was able to draw power from the ethos of the Methodist woman preacher to reach and connect with her audience in the manner that Patricia Bizzell effectively argues enabled Frances Willard to reach her own audience. This ethos, which Bizzell describes as "a particular type of womanly spiritual ethos," likely helped to advance Will to ordination in 1861, whether because she enacted this spiritual ethos or because her audience would have made positive associations between Will and other Methodist women preachers ("Frances Willard" 378). Yet, as time passed and the Wesleyans drew further away from the larger Methodist church, any power Will might have drawn from enacting the ethos of the Methodist woman preachers seems to have faded quickly. By the time her ordination was brought under review at the 1864 Wesleyan Methodist General Conference, the power of the Methodist woman preacher ethos had dissipated.

From the ephemeral scraps of Will's written words that have survived, another source of power, though of a distinctly rhetorical kind, emerges: the undeniable success of her ministry. A handful of updates Will published in *The American Wesleyan* are all that remain of Will's voice,

and in these updates she offers the wider denomination glimpses of news from her congregation. Will's first update appeared in the newspaper on January 23, 1861, a few months after she had arrived in Nora to take charge of the preaching circuit there. Addressing the newspaper's editor, as was standard practice, Will writes:

BRO. PRINDLE:—While writing on business, I will just say to the readers of the *Wesleyan*, that we are enjoying a glorious revival on this Circuit. It is supposed that there have been over one hundred reclaimed or converted, and the work is still going on. We have no house large enough to hold the congregations that assemble from evening to evening. There is another feature of this work which is encouraging; believers are being sanctified. All are pressing forward to perfect holiness. (15)

The factual tone of this update is indicative of Will's other pastoral updates, and through this factual tone Will contrasts herself with her male contemporaries. Most of the updates pastors published in the newspaper were more expansive and included the pastor's ruminations on certain people and events within his congregation (perhaps as a means of smoothing over any challenges or difficulties that had arisen), yet Will's update is succinctly focused "on business." Rather than offering her own extended interpretation or reflection on the status of her church, she draws power and authority from her successes: with more than 100 new members and the need for a larger meeting space, few could deny that Will's ministry was thriving.

The final source of power seen in the evidence surrounding Will is her congregation. Even though Will's name appears in the pastoral rosters that were periodically published in *The American Wesleyan* during the early 1860s, not everyone acknowledged her leadership at her church. In a report on the Nora Quarterly meeting that appeared in the newspaper on May 15, 1861, Will and her husband H.R. were referred to as "Brother and sister Will, the joint pastors of the flock" (Matlack 78). H.R. Will was also an ordained minister, so this confusion is perhaps understandable, but it is more likely that people who encountered Mary Will operated within a terministic screen that equated *pastor*, *preacher*, or *clergy* with *men*. Seeing Will in a pastoral capacity would not fit within that interpretive framework, and categorizing Will with her husband, then, would have been a way to make sense of and explain the lived reality. It is also possible that defining pastor as male led the authors of such reports to intentionally suppress Mary's leadership in her church.

Whatever the case, the confusion over Will's leadership motivated her congregation to come to her defense. A month after the report listing Mary and H.R. Will as "joint pastors" was published, S.A. Stock—a member of Will's congregation—wrote to the editor of *The American Wesleyan* to correct and clarify Will's position as pastor:

BROTHER PRINDLE:—In looking over the Wesleyan, I notice brother Matlack's publication of our quarterly meeting. We think Bro. M. did not understand sister Will's position. We do not censure brother M.; we think he was misguided perhaps by the quarterly conference. *We do not wish it to go out, that sister Will does not have charge of the Nora Circuit. We are glad to say, that our church never has been so well governed under any pastor, as it has been under sister Will. We think it can no longer be said, that a church cannot be well governed by a woman.* There never was a mother who watched over an infant with greater interest, than sister Will has over this church. May God speed the time, when man will no longer trample under foot woman's rights, but, when God calls her to labor in his vineyard, she may not be trammelled. As woman is blamed with the fall of man, we think she should have the privilege of proclaiming his redemption. (Stock 94, emphasis added)

This letter was published on June 12, 1861, and we have no information about this letter's author, S.A. Stock. Yet, Stock's rebuke of those who either confused or intentionally downplayed Mary Will's leadership imbues Will with power by confirming her position and authority as pastor of her church.

It is noteworthy that Will did not offer this correction herself but remained silent and allowed S.A. Stock to speak for her in this venue. In her analysis of women's defenses of women's preaching in nineteenth-century America, Lisa Zimmerelli identified appealing to the power of the call to preach as one of three *topoi* commonly employed. By articulating detailed accounts of the call to preach, women were able to shift agency away from themselves and establish their ethos in a "mandate from God," which also "constituted an exigency that demanded women respond" (Zimmerelli 189). Zimmerelli argues this frequent pivot to narration of the call to preach demonstrates women preachers' rhetorical savviness via their "astute analysis of the constraints and opportunities of their rhetorical situation" (189). While I suspect Will would have employed this rhetorical strategy in her own preaching and pastoral work, she allowed someone else to narrate her calling and capabilities to the readers of *The American Wesleyan*. In so doing, the impact of this letter upon its Wesleyan audience was stronger than if it had come directly from Will, and the power behind Will's pastoral ethos rests in both a divine mandate *and* the support of her congregation.

The power Will drew from the ethos of the Methodist woman preacher, the tangible success of her ministry, and her congregation may not have been enough to keep the denomination from revoking her ordination, but her powerful presence kept her from being fully ignored or completely written out of official histories. In 1878, the county where Will had lived and pastored published *The History of Jo Daviess County, Illinois*, and a significant portion of the book traces the history of Christian denominations in the area. In a section devoted to Will's church in Nora, the book's authors note:

[W]e are unable to fix the date of organization, but it is remembered that the office of pastor was filled by Revs. Mr. Morgan, W. W. Steward, *H. R. Will and his wife Mary A.* During the charge of the latter minister, in 1861, their church was built on the township line road five and one half miles south of Warren. ...The Sunday school was organized in connection with the church at the time of the erection of their building. Its first superintendent was Rev. H. R. Will. (562-563, emphasis added)

Mary Will's name is only briefly dropped into this record, yet her presence is significant. As the only woman to appear in this record, we can assume that Will's role in the church was so powerful that even those who would intentionally or subconsciously suppress women's pastoral activities could not leave her out of the historical record. Echoing the confusion that led to S.A. Stock's letter clarifying Will's role as the pastor of the Nora church, Will is here listed again as pastor alongside her husband, but this record also identifies H.R. as the first superintendent of the Sunday school. This detail offers a hint as to the true dynamic between Mary Will and her husband. Sunday schools were typically operated under the authority of the church, with the superintendent taking responsibility for the administration, budget, and operations of the Sunday school. If Mary Will pastored the church and H.R. ran the Sunday school, it is possible that Mary was effectively H.R.'s boss, which would align with S.A. Stock's letter explaining Mary Will's leadership over the Nora church. In contemporary terms, this would mean Mary was the lead pastor and H.R. was her assistant pastor.

Mary Will's powerful presence also forced the Wesleyan Methodist Connection to contend with her again more than ten years after her deposition. The events that led to Will's appeal are unknown, but at the church's General Conference in 1875, Will's deposition was appealed, and the committee that reviewed her deposition declared that "the action of the Illinois Conference in deposing sister M. A. Will was irregular and illegal" (350-351). Though this was certainly good news for Will, the committee's report was not adopted by the General Conference and support for women's ordination swiftly declined. Will's appeal in 1875 is the last known mention of her in any documented records, and she is noticeably absent from the Wesleyan Methodist archives and the Wesleyan newspaper from this point forward.

Analyzing the Reciprocal Impact: Mary Will's Fractured Legacy

Alongside embracing ephemeral evidence and examining power dynamics, the third element of the institutional sponsorship framework involves analyzing the reciprocal impact of the person and the institution upon one another. Building upon the questions posed in the previous section about power dynamics, analyzing the reciprocal impact between a person and an institution involves asking: *How would the institution and the individual be different if they had not encountered one another?* This is perhaps the most important question posed within the institutional sponsorship framework. From a contemporary vantage point, institutional sponsorship

looks at the changes in policies, leadership positions, and organizational structures that result from an institution's interaction with an individual figure. These changes might be bold and readily apparent, or they might be subtle and visible only in the aftermath of the figure's relationship with the institution. Whatever the case, changes and alterations are indicative of the nuanced power dynamics described above and serve as fruitful sites for analysis. As Kara Poe Alexander's exploration of *reciprocal sponsorship* demonstrates, sponsorship need not be a "one-way" or "fixed" dynamic in which the sponsor influences the sponsored. Rather, Alexander argues, the sponsorship relationship can be fluid and reciprocal—that both parties can serve as sponsors for one another. The same can be true in an institutional sponsorship framework: the person and the institution can shape one another, and both can wield power. For historical figures, the reciprocal impact might be visible during the person's lifetime (e.g., changes that directly affected the person's career), in subsequent generations (e.g., policy changes, shifts in institutional structures), or both. To revisit Royster and Kirsch's social circulation language, the reciprocal sponsorship impact "invokes connections among past, present, and future" (*Feminist* 23).

The complex relationship between Mary Will and her denomination as seen through the ephemera and power dynamics above demonstrate a fluid relational dynamic. Both wielded differing forms of power and influence, and both impacted the other. While the Wesleyan Methodist Connection held the power of ordination and controlled Will's career, Will left lasting imprints upon both her church in Nora, Illinois and the Wesleyan-Methodist denomination. Her calling to ministry and apparent leadership strengths prompted the Illinois Conference to make her the first Wesleyan woman to receive ordination and assign her to a preaching circuit, which both contributed to ongoing debates about women in church leadership and provoked new debate within the denomination. Will's presence created ripple effects felt by the denomination and the women within it for generations to come, and the challenges to Will's ordination reflect the shifting ideology of the Wesleyan Methodists.

Despite the radical reform mentality that birthed the Wesleyan-Methodist denomination and its founder's public support of women's ordination, when Will came into ministry the prevailing attitude seemed to be that women had already advanced far enough. Wesleyan women already enjoyed greater access than in many other societal spheres, as they were able to cast votes in their local churches and to publish in *The American Wesleyan* newspaper, and women were central to the battle for temperance, which was becoming a prominent issue among Wesleyans during Mary Will's time. While some still demonstrated a more activist stance, most Wesleyans seemed content to preserve the status quo surrounding women and were beginning to embrace the 'separate spheres' ideology that confined women to the domestic or private sphere. As Barbara Welter, Nan Johnson, and others have demonstrated, this gender ideology rose in popularity among white, middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century, including Wesleyans.

This shift away from the Wesleyans' radical reform mentality of the 1840s toward the separate spheres ideology is reflected both in Mary Will's career and in *The American Wesleyan*. In 1847—more than a decade before Will's ordination—a woman, Sarah A. Rice, wrote to the editor with a unique request: "Will the Editor be so kind as to recur to the 20th number of May 15th, 1847, and give us the *vice versa* of an article 'To Wives'?" The "To Wives" article referenced was a detailed list of nine things wives should do to please their husbands, and Rice chastises its author, stating that he "assumes the office of dictator" and "issues down his terms as if he were an occupant of the upper world; or belonged to a higher species of some grade of superhuman nature" (1). This "supercilious manner of dictation to women," Rice observes, is "neither new nor uncommon." Rice then challenges the author to examine his own gender bias and to "occasionally reflect upon the deteriorating and degrading tendency of caste of sex, the necessary result of those conventional usages by which the power of the strong exalts itself to such an astonishing supremacy" (1).

Rice follows this rebuke with a series of illuminating questions about the biblical and theological assumptions behind the "To Wives" article and concludes with a further challenge to the newspaper's editor, briefly excerpted here:

First, Can the mind under compound systems of physical power, civil, religious and domestic, ever attain its proper growth or the mortal and intellectual stature which its benevolent Creator meant it should?

Second, Should not all human beings who possess incontrovertably productive energies sufficient to secure them in the rights of free agency, personal responsibility, and self-control, enjoy them?

Third, Liberty is as necessary to the growth and expansion of the soul as is space to the body. Is that policy of society, of law, and of provincial justice, therefore right and just, which deprives females of all strength by securing their greatest possible dependence?

...Few Editors have moral magnanimity enough to allow females the liberty of the press, if they say anything which does not fall precisely in the wake of public sentiment. Can [this newspaper] publish this? If not, he is requested to send it to some lover of truth, if any such can be found, who will. (Rice 1)

The newspaper editor granted her request, commenting, "We shall henceforth claim to belong to the most magnanimous class of editors, for we allow our lady correspondent the use of our columns, to say what is as far from the wake of public sentiment, as the general pursuits of men are from the duties of the nursery and the kitchen" (1). Printed just below Rice's letter and

the editor's note was "To Husbands," which opens by noting that a man's first thought after marriage should be, "How shall I continue the love I have inspired?" Following this guiding question are the nine points of advice originally proffered to wives with the nouns and pronouns switched to refer to husbands. For example, the eighth point reads:

Few things please a woman more than seeing her husband noble and clever in the management of his household. A knowledge of cookery, as well as every other branch in housekeeping is indispensable in a male; and a husband should always endeavor to support with applause, the character of the *gentleman* and the *house-keeper*. (Rice 1)

Subsequent issues of the newspaper do not indicate how Rice's request and the "To Husbands" column was received.

By the 1870s, however, any "magnanimous" editorial spirit seems to have abated and such a request from a woman is less likely to have been entertained. On July 12, 1876, after Will's ordination had been revoked and then restored, *The American Wesleyan* published an article written by Mrs. J. P. Spaulding, who was married to the current pastor of the Nora Circuit where Will had pastored. Mrs. Spaulding's article, "Duties of a Pastor's Wife," argued that a woman's primary responsibility was to care for her children. The pastor's wife should also support her husband's ministry through prayer and encouragement, but, Mrs. Spaulding concludes, "the position of mother [is] higher, nobler, holier than any of her sphere in which woman was ever called to act" (2). Mrs. Spaulding's sentiments reflect an ideology that would confine women to the domestic sphere (see Bizzell, "Chastity"; Johnson, "Gender"; Welton), and her exhortation to pastor's wives seems to be a direct response to women like Will who continually sought to work outside of the domestic sphere in the church.

Yet, even as the Wesleyan Methodist Connection seemed to embrace at the institutional level the separate spheres ideology, Will could not be contained within the domestic sphere. The Wesleyans continued to debate about women after Will's deposition, but she remained in Illinois and continued her ministry. Though her husband H.R. was now the 'official' pastor in the family, the 1867 pastoral roster listed "H.R. and M.A. Will" as pastors of the preaching circuit at Ophir, Illinois, and Mary Will's name appeared on a publicized list of speakers for a regional ministry conference held in early 1867. Apparently, Mary Will's pastoral calling and giftedness in ministry were so significant that the institution—her denomination—had no choice but to allow her continued presence in ministry.

Years later, after Will's deposition had been reversed, Mrs. H. E. Hayden, another preacher and contemporary of Will would allude to Will's impact upon the Wesleyan Methodist Connection thus: "The Lord designed that the Illinois Conference should take the lead in giving the sisters a helping hand by ordaining them. I am sorry that after they had taken a step or two, they backslid.

I hope they will soon be reclaimed” (Hayden 1). Mrs. H. E. Hayden was a vocal and visible advocate among the Wesleyans for women’s ordination and women’s right to preach, but she was never ordained. It seems that Hayden and many other women who sought to preach over the next few decades were casualties of the “backslide” resulting from the controversy over Mary Will.

From 1879-1891, Wesleyans formally ceased ordaining women but did allow them to serve as licensed ministers.² Wesleyan women were able to seek ordination again after that period, but the Wesleyans never regained the radical hope that had characterized their earliest years and led Will to ordination. Today, Will’s denomination, now known as the Wesleyan Church, is quick to celebrate its history of ordaining women. In 2011, a small brochure appeared at church conferences, “Celebrating 150 Years of Women in Ministry in the Wesleyan Church.” The brochure highlights Will’s ordination in 1861, but the more complete story of Will’s deposition and the denomination’s fractured legacy of support for women’s ordination is absent from both the brochure and the broader denominational consciousness.

If not for Will, Wesleyans would not be able to (accurately) claim that their denomination has been ordaining women since 1861, and this legacy and history has attracted women seeking ordination to the Wesleyans. If not for Will’s appeal and restoration to ministry in 1875, the Wesleyans may have ceased ordaining women entirely during the nineteenth century, and her presence contributed to the continuation of women’s ordination in America. Despite this legacy, a study conducted in 2016 concluded that just 7.75% of all senior or solo pastors in the Wesleyan Church are women (Hammond 65). This figure places the Wesleyan Church slightly behind American Protestant churches, where women comprise just 9% of senior pastors (Barna Group).

By using the institutional sponsorship framework to analyze Will’s relationship with the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, Will emerges as a passionate, gifted leader whose presence forced her denomination to grapple with its position on women’s ordination. Many women who stand in Will’s fractured legacy have found that, like Will, their journey to and beyond ordination is a tumultuous one. Perhaps a greater awareness of Will would benefit women today who face challenges in their own ordination processes and ministerial careers.

Conclusion

This article participates in mapping the visibility and mobility of women that Royster and Kirsch call for by mapping Rev. Mary A. Will’s sponsorship relationship with her denomination.

- 2 A minister’s license is often an early and required stage in the ordination process. Once licensed, a minister is authorized to conduct local church business (e.g., officiating weddings and funerals, delivering sermons) but is unable to vote or participate in the business of the denomination. By not allowing women to advance beyond the licensed minister stage, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was effectively able to benefit from women’s labor without offering them a voice in the denomination’s leadership.

Institutional sponsorship offers a means of responding to Nan Johnson's call to "widen the view" of feminist rhetorical scholarship, and it invites new possibilities for further study and analysis. My exploration of Will and the Wesleyan-Methodist Connection of America highlights the complex relationships that can occur between a person and an institution, and it also demonstrates the ability to recover a figure's rhetorical presence by examining the impact a figure has left upon an institution. While the denomination exercised significant power over her, Will—through her continued pursuit of ministry—shaped the Wesleyan legacy of women's ordination. Will's existence and effectiveness in ministry made her impossible to ignore or erase. Even after her deposition, the denomination acknowledged Will's effectiveness in ministry and affirmed her as a "co-laborer in Christ," and Will and her husband remained active in the denomination throughout their lives ("Illinois Conference" 2). Despite looming in the shadows as a nearly forgotten, silhouetted historical figure, Will's presence has rippled across time and impacted generations of women and Wesleyans, and her presence provides additional context for existing rhetorical scholarship on women preachers.

Institutional sponsorship builds upon the work begun by Cheryl Glenn, Nan Johnson, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, and so many more by forwarding a new means of approaching recovery work and bringing silhouetted figures into sharper focus. Where other methods might see only an absence, institutional sponsorship locates a rhetorical presence at the convergence of ephemeral evidence, power dynamics, and reciprocity. I hope to see more historical figures recovered and analyzed using the institutional sponsorship framework.

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