

A note on the text of *Manfred*

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As Jerome McGann tells us, Byron rewrote the third act of *Manfred* when he corrected the proofs in response to criticism from William Gifford. Gifford especially disliked the character of the Abbot: ‘The scene with the Friar ought to be imposing, & for that purpose the Friar should be a real good man – not an idiot’.¹ Byron agreed that the third act was ‘certainly d-d bad’, and meekly re-wrote it.² He sent it from Rome to Murray on 5 May 1817, noting that, ‘the Abbot is become a good man’, and ‘you will find I think some good poetry in this new act here & there – & if so print it – without sending me further proofs – *under Mr. G[ifford]’s correction* – if he will have the goodness to overlook it’.³ An evidently relieved Murray wrote back to Byron on 30 May 1817: ‘The Third Act is not only infinitely improved – but contains some of the finest passages in the Drama [...] Mr G – has corrected the Proofs & I have just sent them to press, hoping to publish next week’.⁴ The revised third act in Byron’s handwriting was the printer’s copy for the first edition, read in proof by Gifford, but

¹ Jerome J. McGann (ed.), *Lord Byron, The Complete Poetical Works Volume IV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; repr. 1992), p. 462. Andrew Nicholson (ed.), *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 220.

² *BLJ*, V, p. 211.

³ *BLJ*, V, p. 219.

⁴ Nicholson (ed.), *The Letters of John Murray*, p. 231. *Manfred* was published on 16 June 1817.

not by Byron. ‘B[yron]’s decision not to correct further proofs turned out to be most unfortunate’, McGann observes, ‘for the first published edition – and all later editions – printed a corrupt text’.⁵ It is well known that the omission of Manfred’s last line of speech, which so enraged Byron, was beyond his control, but close examination of the manuscript of the revised third act reveals a different sort of error that has gone unnoticed for nearly 200 years.

When the Abbot advises ‘penitence and pardon’ (III i 58), Manfred responds with a litany of negatives printed as follows:

MAN. Old man! there is no power in holy men,
Nor charm in prayer – nor purifying form
Of penitence – nor outward look – nor fast –
Nor agony – nor, greater than all these,
The innate tortures of that deep despair,
Which is remorse without the fear of hell,
But all in all sufficient to itself
Would make a hell of heaven ... (III i 66-73)

If we look at the manuscript of Act III which is held in the John Murray Archive in the National Library of Scotland, however, it is clear that the printer (who only had

⁵ McGann (ed.), *Complete Poetical Works*, IV, pp. 464-5.

this copy to go on) has misread line 68: Byron actually wrote ‘... nor outward lash’ rather than ‘nor outward look’.⁶

[Please insert image 1: page 45r of MS. 43335]

[Please insert image 2: crop of line 68]

The word ‘look’ does not make a huge amount of sense in the context, but its vague accordance with a set of contrasts between the superficial, punitive forms of religion and the deeper awareness of the ‘self-condemn’d’ (III i 77) allowed it to slip past Gifford and all subsequent editors, as well as Byron himself. Once we read ‘outward lash’ instead of ‘outward look’, we recover Manfred’s specific dismissal of concrete forms of penance as well as restoring the scornful sibilance of a line that chimes with the alliterative pulse of this speech as a whole.⁷

⁶ NLS MS. 43335, p. 45r.

⁷ I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for the award of a Major Research Fellowship that allowed me to spend time consulting Byron’s manuscripts, and to David McClay and the staff of the John Murray Archive for their help in locating and photographing material. Permission to quote was kindly granted by the National Library of Scotland.