

Byron's Marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*

ALEX WATSON

Abstract

This article examines the handwritten notes Byron scribbled in 1816 in a copy of the fourth edition of his 1809 poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. It argues that these notes shed new light on both Byron's composition practice and the complex interplay the poet creates between fixed and unstable versions of his authorial identity. It also claims that the notes highlight the need for scholars to establish a more sensitive understanding of Romantic-period textual practices.

In 1816, Byron scribbled a number of marginal comments in a copy of the fourth edition of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* that belonged to his friend and collaborator Robert Charles Dallas. Byron littered this volume with grandiose denunciations of his earlier work, beginning on the front page with:

Nothing but the consideration of its being the property of another, prevents me from consigning this miserable record of misplaced anger and indiscriminate acrimony to the flames.¹

These notes are of particular interest because of the scarcity of examples of such authorial marginalia in the period. As Heather Jackson has pointed out, 'authorial reflections and revisions are marginalia of a special kind'.² Non-authorial annotators interact with an exterior voice, that of the author whose work they are annotating, but this is not the case with self-annotators. In his hand-written annotations to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, Byron is engaging with a previous self, and in this essay I wish to trace how the Byron of 1816 characterises his relationship with the younger Byron of 1809 who wrote the poem he would now consign to 'the flames'.

Yet these marginal comments have an ambiguous status. Should we regard them as an intrinsic aspect of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*? Are they contextual supplements, exterior to the text? Or should we see them as what the critic Gerald Genette labelled 'paratexts': liminal devices, like titles, prefaces and epigraphs, which mediate between reader and text?³ Byron's later editors, such as Murray, Coleridge and McGann, have included the marginalia, in abridged, edited form, as notes to the poetic text. In so doing, they treat the marginalia as a kind of paratext. In 1936, however, John Murray, the grandson of Byron's publisher, produced a facsimile of the Dallas volume for the Roxburghe club, with the notes repeated in the margins in typescript to make them easier to read (see the preceding illustrations). As a result, Murray gave the

the time of this event.

ENGLISH BARDS,

50

Where yon proud palace, Fashion's hallowed fane,
 Spreads wide her portals for the motley train,
 Behold the new Petronius* of the day,
 The Arbiter of pleasure and of play!
 There the hired Eunuch, the Hesperian choir,
 The melting lute, the soft lascivious lyre,
 The song from Italy, the step from France,
 The midnight orgy, and the mazy dance,

True—it was Billy
 W—y who lost the
 money. I knew him—
 & was a subscriber to
 the Argyle at the time
 of this event.

True—it was Billy W—y who lost the money & was a subscriber to the Argyle at the time of this event.

A gentleman with whom I am slightly acquainted, lost in the Argyle Rooms several thousand pounds at Backgammon; it is but justice to the manager in this instance to say, that some degree of disapprobation was manifested; but why are the implements of gaming allowed in a place devoted to the society of both sexes? A pleasant thing for the wives and daughters of those who are blest or curst with such connections, to hear the Billiard-tables rattling in one room, and the dice in another! That this is the case I myself can testify, as a late unworthy member of an Institution which materially affects the morals of the higher orders, while the lower may not even move to the sound of a tabor and fiddle without a chance of indictment for riotous behaviour.

* Petronius, "Arbiter elegantiarum" to Nero, "and a very pretty fellow in his day," as Mr. CONGREVE'S Old Bachelor saith.

Illustration A

Bœtian COTTLE, rich Bristowa's boast,

Imports old stories from the Cambrian coast,

And sends his goods to market—all alive!

Lines forty-thousand, Cantos twenty-five!

Fresh fish from Helicon! who'll buy? who'll buy?

Helicon is a mountain and not a fish-pond—it should have been Hippocrene

Helicon is a mountain and not a fish-pond—it should have been Hippocrene

Illustration B

† It would be superfluous to recal to the mind of the reader, the author of "The Pleasures of Memory" and "The Pleasures of Hope," the most beautiful Didactic poems in our language, if we except Pope's Essay on Man: but so many poetasters have started up, that even the names of CAMPBELL and ROGERS are become strange.

"Pretty Miss Jaqueline While Mr. Marmion
 "Had a nose aquiline, Led a great army on
 "And would assert rude Making Kehama look
 "Things of Miss Gertrude. Like a fierce Marmaluke.

"Pretty Miss Jaqueline
 "Had a nose aquiline,
 "And would assert rude
 "Things of Miss Gertrude.

While Mr. Marmion
 Led a great army on
 Making Kehama look
 Like a fierce Marmaluke.

Illustration C

AND SCOTCH REVIEWERS.

79

And Afric's coast and Calpe's* adverse height, *Saw it*
 And Stamboul's† minarets must greet my sight: *August 1809.* Saw it August 1809
 Thence shall I stray through beauty's‡ native clime,
 Where Kaff§ is clad in rocks, and crowned with snows
 sublime.
 But should I back return, no lettered rage
 Shall drag my common-place book on the stage:
 Let vain VALENTIA|| rival luckless CARR,
 And equal him whose work he sought to mar;

* Calpe is the ancient name of Gibraltar. *Saw it - August 1809.* Saw it August 1809
 † Stamboul is the Turkish word for Constantinople. *Saw it Was there* Was there the Summer 1810
 ‡ Georgia, remarkable for the beauty of its inhabitants. *the Summer 1810.* Saw the distant ridge of— 1810—1811
 § Mount Caucasus. *Saw the distant ridge of - 1810-1811.*
 || LORD VALENTIA (whose tremendous travels are forthcoming with

Illustration D

Source: Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* [A facsimile of the fourth edition containing MS. Notes by Lord Byron], ed. by Sir John Murray (London: Roxburghe Club, 1936), British Library, shelf-mark C.101.d.27. Reproduced with the permission of the Roxburghe Club and the British Library.

Alex Watson

marginalia greater prominence, valuing them to some degree in and of themselves, as well as for the light they shine upon the text. By considering the marginalia's position in relation to the text, I do not wish to set out a 'correct' editorial treatment of them. Nevertheless, the complex dynamic that Byron establishes between marginalia and text does give us an opportunity to reassess the appropriateness of the categories – text, paratext, marginalia – available to us for describing marginal annotations.

Byron's notes certainly look like conventional marginalia. As can be seen in the illustrations, Byron wrote most of them vertically up the left- or right-hand side of the page, holding the book upright while reading it and turning it 90 degrees clockwise or anticlockwise to scrawl a comment (see particularly illustration A). Often he marked the section to which he was referring with a vertical line in the margin, or underlined individual words (see the underlining of 'fresh', 'fish' and 'helicon', for example, below line 385 in illustration B). On a few occasions (as in illustration A) Byron began writing in one direction and then, finding he had no more space, started writing vertically across the left-hand margin or along the top of the page. Byron seems to act like a modern-day reader, thinking and writing his marginalia virtually simultaneously, rather than as an 'author' carefully adjusting and readjusting the meaning of his text.

In another sense, however, the notes represent an authorial revision of the poetic text they comment on. Beside a passage (see illustration B) in which Byron compares the influx of poetic epics on to the marketplace to 'fresh fish from Helicon!' (391), he corrects himself drolly: 'Helicon is a mountain and not a fish-pond – it should have been Hippocrene' (p. 31). He underlines the nouns 'Helicon', 'mountain' and 'Hippocrene' as though he could rectify his mistake through forcefulness alone. He also changes his description of the Edinburgh reviewers from the sarcastic 'ranks illustrious' (502) to the more pointed 'oatfed phalanx' (p. 39). (Here the adjective 'oatfed' is an allusion to Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary definition of 'oats' as a 'grain, which [...] in Scotland appears to support the people', while the noun 'phalanx' or 'a line in battle' is a reminder of the eighteenth-century Jacobite threat.) Such notes resemble acts of revision more closely than they do conventional annotation. Rather than simply commenting on or mediating the verse, they intervene actively in it, seeking to reshape it directly.

Other notes are more akin to doodles or graffiti. Next to his bitter complaint in a footnote to the published poem stating that 'so many poetasters have started up, that even the names of CAMPBELL and ROGERS are become strange', Byron appends a laconic fragment of verse (see illustration C):

Pretty Miss Jacqueline
Had a nose aquiline
And would assert rude
Things of Miss Gertrude

While Mr. Marmion
Led a great army on
Making Kehama look
Like a fierce Marmaluke. (p. 61)

Byron's Marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*

The first stanza imagines Samuel Rogers, the author of *Jacqueline* (1814), dismissing Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809). The second makes an analogy between the commercial supremacy of Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) over Robert Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) and Napoleon's triumph over the Marmelukes of Egypt at the battle of the Pyramids in 1798. While the annotation takes its cue from the printed text, however, it does not intervene in it. The marginalia here assume an independent existence, as a text in their own right (and this is signalled by McGann's printing of these lines as a separate text in volume four of the *Complete Poetical Works*, rather than as part of the notes to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in volume one).⁴

Many notes do, nevertheless, establish a more conventionally paratextual relationship with the printed verse, commenting on or reshaping its meaning. In these cases, Byron frames the poem as the work of a former self, seeking to make a clear distinction between the youth who initially wrote the poem and the older self speaking from the margins. In such examples, Byron directly repudiates his former opinions. He scratches the adjective 'unjust' (see, for example, p. 20), along with many of the vituperative attacks on public figures he launched within the poem in 1809. When he comes to a note that featured in the original publication praising Sir William Gell's 1804 *Topography of Troy* – 'Mr. Gell's *Topography of Troy and Ithaca* cannot fail to ensure the approbation of every man possessed of classical taste' – Byron rejects this verdict in his marginalia: 'Since seeing the plain of Troy, my opinions are somewhat changed as to the above note. Gell's survey was hasty and superficial' (p. 80). Here Byron does not simply correct the poem. He stresses the more mature understanding he has gained from the Grand Tour he undertook between 1809 and 1811. Through the display of acquired knowledge, Byron subtly separates former and current selves. Similarly, in the suppressed 1811 edition, Byron had added terse footnotes to geographical locations mentioned, glossing 'Afric's coast and Calpe's adverse height' (1019) as 'Gibraltar', and 'Stamboul's minarets' (1020) as 'Stamboul' (see illustration D). He now adjoins marginal comments marking the dates on which he later visited these places: 'Saw it August 1809'; 'Was there the Summer 1810'; 'Saw the distant ridge of – 1810–1811' (p. 79). This deployment of such first-hand knowledge follows the practice of creating what Jackson calls 'eyewitness marginalia', which she argues was common among readers of the period.⁵ At the same time, given Byron's status as the author as well as the reader of this text, these marginal comments also become a record of the alterations he has undergone since he wrote the text, differentiating the Byron of now from the Byron of then.

Byron's desire to use marginalia to frame the verse as the utterance of a former self can be readily understood, given the critical reception of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. The viciousness of Byron's attacks on a number of public figures quickly made the poem notorious. The *Literary Journal* credited Byron with having begun a 'paper-war',⁶ while the hymn writer and poet James Montgomery compared the poem to a 'game-cock spectacle'.⁷ Byron's main target was Francis Jeffrey, but he lashed out at a cast of additional characters, from the historian Henry Hallam to the theat-

rical performers ‘Naldi and Catalini’. Indeed, many critics attacked Byron for his poor choice of targets. The *Critical Review* claimed that many ‘victorious offenders escaped unnoticed’, while ‘some are acquitted or marked with applause, whom a more correct judgement would have condemned’.⁸ Others criticised Byron’s censoriousness: the *Christian Observer*, for example, likened the poem to ‘one of those playful vessels, which are said to have accompanied the Spanish armada, manned by executioners, and loaded with instruments of torture’.⁹ As Byron confessed later: ‘I was angry – and determined to be witty – and fighting in a crowd dealt about my blows against all alike without discrimination or discernment’.¹⁰ He eventually suppressed the poem in 1811, of course, at the request of Lord Holland.

Byron’s marginalia on Dallas’s copy of the fourth edition can be seen as responses to the criticism *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* received, not least when they stress Byron’s retrospective regret over the poem:

The greater part of this satire I most sincerely wish had never been written – not only on account of the injustice of much of the critical, and some of the personal part of it – but the tone and temper are such as I cannot approve. (p. 82)

In other annotations he even seems to be trying to make some small amends by subjecting the poem to further criticism, while also stressing the reformation of his character. In some Byron seems to stress the continuity between his past and present selves. An endnote to the ‘Preface to the Second Edition’ states: ‘The noble lord had left this country previous to the publication of that Edition, and is not yet returned.’ The marginalia replies: ‘He is and gone again – 1816’ (p. 62). Here the Byron of exile equates himself with the earlier Byron on the cusp of the ‘years of fame’. But such gestures of self-identification are often repentant. In the original verse, Byron dedicated his youth to adventure and pleasure: ‘Freed at that age when Reason’s shield is lost, / To fight my course through Passion’s countless host’ (673–74). In the margins, Byron responds sagaciously: ‘Yea – and a precious chace they led me’ (p. 54). With the old-fashioned manner of the doleful ‘yea’ and pseudo-antiquarian spelling of ‘chace’ Byron mocks the verse’s chivalric pretensions, overlaying them with later regrets. The effect is bathetic: the verse affirms; the annotation negates.

At another moment, a line in the verse describes the poet as ‘some kind, censorious friend’ (697) and asks: ‘What art thou better, meddling fool, than they?’ (700). A marginal note responds: ‘Fool enough, certainly, then, and no wiser since’ (p. 54). The first clause is self-censuring, with ‘fool’ and ‘then’ written at a sharper angle than the rest as if Byron wanted to correct such faults through sheer force of expression. The second clause, however, rebounds upon the first, reshaping the sentence into a self-deprecating admission. In such examples, Byron does not simply distance himself from his former writings. He redefines his present self in relation to his past one, noting – in order to lament – continuities as well as insisting upon discontinuities. Indeed, in some of his more rueful utterances, Byron seems to be scouring his earlier text for explanations of his present situation, separated from Lady Byron and ‘exiled’ from England. Byron makes bitter, witty parallels between the sentiments expressed in the

verse and his recent experiences. At one point he even congratulates his former self for the instruction to the 'Suppressors of our Vice' to 'Raise not your scythe' (632) by inscribing the adjective 'good' (p. 49) alongside it.

There is clearly a demonstrative aspect to such behaviour. The owner of the volume he was scribbling in had supported Byron during his recent public vilification in 1816. Moreover, Dallas had played a pivotal role in the publishing history of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, acting as Byron's early editor and publishing agent, and offering an early draft of the poem unsuccessfully to Longman's in January 1808. In one sense, Byron's corrections signal his indebtedness to Dallas's advice. But they also act as assertions of his own autonomy, demonstrating the mature Byron's ability to identify the weaknesses of his work and character for himself.

Indeed, a number of Byron's annotations are complicated, entangled and work on a number of levels. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the verse jotting I mentioned earlier, beginning 'Since pretty Miss Jacqueline'. By celebrating *Marmion's* high sales, Byron – whose *Corsair* famously sold ten thousand copies in one day – implicitly trumpets his own commercial success. The verse captures the anarchic quality of market forces, glorying in the fickleness and unpredictability of the public taste. Indeed this poetic sketch could be said to present sales as the only measure of cultural status in the new era of professionalised authorship. But Byron's use of personification complicates such a reading. The replacement of authors' names with the titles of their works suggests an anxious recognition of the author's vulnerability to commercial forces. The market is presented as possessing the ability to undermine authors, to construct an identity for their work independent of its creator. While Byron's marginalia are an attempt to assume a degree of interpretative control over their reader, these verses offer a liminal acknowledgement of the futility of such an undertaking in an age of commercial authorship. Byron's notes to his own poem suggest an uncomfortable acknowledgement, born of personal experience, of the impotence of the author in the face of his or her audience.

However, a further perspective on this particular annotation is opened up by Byron's reproduction of the first two lines of these scribbled verses in a letter to John Murray.¹¹ Byron frequently peppered his correspondence with such doggerel verses. Often – as he does in this case – he reproduced these verses in slightly altered forms for different correspondents,¹² indicating a public aspect to his private utterances: the creation of a semi-public self designed for a coterie of close literary associates (such as Dallas and Murray), an identity that is broadly consistent yet also subtly refined in different ways for different recipients. And the fact that Byron's annotations to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* were in part directed at one member of this coterie (Dallas) but could be re-used in correspondence with others should act as a warning to literary scholars and historians who use marginalia to try to infer from them the unprocessed mental experiences of readers from past historical periods.¹³ Rather than representing an unmediated outpouring of Byron's thoughts and feelings, his marginal notes on *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* can frequently be strategic inscriptions, made with

specific rhetorical ends in view.

These considerations show that attempts to provide stable, universally applicable definitions of textual practices such as marginalia based on surveys of Western literature – perhaps the most famous of these being Genette’s *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* – obscure some of the complexities and nuances of the phenomena in question. In particular, simply labelling such activities ‘auxiliary’ or ‘mediatory’ risks conflating the practices of a print culture from an earlier period with the textual conventions of our own time. As the *OED* reveals, the first recorded usage of the term ‘footnote’ was only in 1841. Even the term ‘marginalia’ was only coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1832 – 16 years after the example we have been examining. The absence of this lexicon shows us that in the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries writers operated in a subtly different print culture from our own. Many conventions we take for granted were still emerging and more fluid.

It is therefore not enough to describe Byron’s 1816 marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* as either text or paratext. They are not a separate text in their own right, but neither are they a straightforward extension of another text. They exist as a text connected to another text, deriving their meaning from that relationship. But they also achieve mastery over the other text to which they are related, assuming a position of judgement over it. In this way, they show us that the borders we erect between ‘text’ and ‘paratext’ require consistent interrogation, as well the constant acknowledgement of the contingency and instability of such labels. We might then be able to treat the informal annotations of a writer such as Byron with the critical sensitivity they deserve.

University of Huddersfield



- 1 Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* [*A facsimile of the fourth edition containing MS. Notes by Lord Byron*], ed. by Sir John Murray (London: Roxburghe Club, 1936), p. 1. All quotations from Byron’s annotations to Dallas’s copy of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* are from this facsimile, and henceforth followed by page references in the main text. To avoid confusion, the line references given for quotations from *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* itself are also taken from this facsimile of the fourth edition, and not from *CPW*.
- 2 H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 13.
- 3 Genette lists these conventions as: ‘a title, a subtitle, intertitles [titles *within* the book, such as chapter headings or the titles of individual poems]; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal [printed on the side of the page], infrapaginal [at the bottom of the page], terminal notes [at the end of a volume]; epigraphs, illustrations, blurbs, book covers, dust jackets’ (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997], p. 3 (the definitions in square brackets are mine). Interestingly, Genette does not mention marginalia at all in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987). But he does provide a definition of notes that could also encompass marginalia: ‘A note is a statement of variable length (one word is enough) connected to a more or less definite segment of text and either

Byron's Marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*

- placed opposite or keyed to this segment' (*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, with a foreword by Richard Marksey [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], p. 319).
- 4 In his notes to the fragment, McGann observes that it was first published in Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with notices of his life* (1830) and that 'thereafter the verses were commonly printed as part of the notes to *EBSR* [line] 804, which is where B[yrone] originally jotted the lines' (*CPW*, IV, p. 454).
 - 5 H. J. Jackson, *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 242. Jackson also presents the example of the physician Phillip MacDermott, who purchased a copy of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, adding his own marks, headings, index entries and 'explanatory footnotes identifying persons, places and events when Byron had neglected to do so' (p. 73).
 - 6 Anonymous, 'Review of Books: *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* by Lord Byron', *Literary Journal* (19 April 1818), reprinted in Donald Henry Reiman (ed.), *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, Pt. B: Byron and Regency Poets* (New York: Garland, 1972), pp. 1477–79 (p. 1477).
 - 7 James Montgomery, Review of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, *Eclectic Review* (May 1809), in Reiman (ed.), *Romantics Reviewed*, pp. 703–704 (pp. 703, 704).
 - 8 Anonymous, Review of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, *Critical Review* (May 1809), in Reiman (ed.), *Romantics Reviewed*, pp. 607–11 (p. 608).
 - 9 Anonymous, Review of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Christian Observer* (June 1812), in Reiman (ed.), *Romantics Reviewed*, pp. 559–70 (p. 560).
 - 10 Letter to Leigh Hunt of 22 October 1815, in *BLJ*, IV, p. 320.
 - 11 See Byron's letter of 15 September 1817, in *BLJ*, VI, p. 266.
 - 12 He sent, for instance, subtly differing versions of the lines beginning 'I read the Christabel' to Moore (on 25 March 1817), Murray (on 25 March 1817) and Hobhouse (on 31 March 1817). See *BLJ*, V, pp. 187, 193–94, 199.
 - 13 In *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), for instance, William H. Sherman describes the marginalia of John Dee as 'traces of active reading' (p. 54).