Writing on Writing on Writing: An Afternoon’s Foray Into Marginalia and Revisions

**Keywords**
transcription, marginalia

**View on Penn Manuscript Collective Blog**
https://pennmanuscriptcollective.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/writing-on-writing-on-writing-an-afternoons-foray-into-marginalia-and-revisions/

**Creative Commons License**
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.
On Friday, December 6th, the Penn Manuscript Collective gathered for its final meeting of 2013. Our topic for the day: marginalia. Why discuss such a ludicrously large topic? First, many of the most exciting books in the Kislak Center’s collection feature interesting marginal notes. Second, we got a chance to (electronically) visit the manuscript of the Autobiography of Ben Franklin. Thirdly, we were able to discuss the relationship between annotation and bookmaking. Finally, this gave the Rare Book and Manuscript Library the chance to show off a new find—a book with Lord Byron’s marginalia.

**Interleaving**

Our study then turned to interleaved books. An interleaved book has blank sheets of paper between the printed sheets in order to make space for comments or notes. Sometimes publishers sent out interleaved editions of books to solicit feedback from readers, who write on the blank pages. At the Penn Manuscript Collective’s meeting, we looked at two examples of interleaved books, both almanacs.
On the blank leaf the owners wrote every day of the month, recording weather and events that had occurred that day. These almanacs interested us not only for their content, but for the method in which they were interleaved: smaller sheets of paper were sown in between the leaves of the almanac to create the writing page. This type of interleaving appeared to be hand-done after the almanac was made.

"I was young..." meta-revisions in D'Israeli's *The Literary Character*

People often write in their favorite books—commenting on a passage they like, asking a question, critiquing an author—and apparently Lord Byron was no different. We looked an 1818 edition of Isaac D'Israeli’s *The Literary Character* that Byron owned and annotated.
Byron enjoyed the works of D’Israeli, and it is said that he read himself to sleep with D’Israeli’s books. *The Literary Character* was first issued in 1795, and Byron first owned and annotated a copy of this early edition, which fell into the hands of D’Israeli. Dismayed at Byron’s comments, D’Israeli mentions them in the preface to the 1818 edition. Commenting on D’Israeli’s comments on Byron’s comments, Byron writes ruefully:

*I was wrong, but I was young and petulant, and probably wrote down everything, little thinking that those observations would be betrayed to the author whose abilities I have always respected and whose works in general I have read oftener than perhaps any English author.*

D’Israeli compares Byron to the Italian playwright Vittorio Alfieri, writing

*They* were rarely seen amidst the brilliant circle in which they were born—one deep loneliness of feeling proudly insulated them

Byron evidently does with D’Israeli’s first statement—”rarely seen amidst the brilliant circle”. Indeed, he seems to feel claustrophobic among his society, writing

*I fear this was not the case. I have been too much in that circle, especially in 1813-1814.*

However, Byron affirms the second statement—”one deep loneliness...insulated them”—underlining ”deep loneliness” and writing “true.”
Benjamin Franklin: an ambivalent blotter

Our day concluded with a survey of revisions in the manuscript of Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography. For this part of the meeting, I shared some findings from a project I completed with Ben Notkin last spring. Using the Huntington Library’s digitized facsimile, Ben and I examined Franklin’s auto-editing techniques.

A prolific printer, Franklin viewed his life as a text in which there existed “errata,” mistakes, which should be corrected in a second edition. Indeed, he composed an epitaph as a young man in 1728 that read:

The body of
B. Franklin, Printer
(Like the Cover of an Old Book
Its Contents torn Out
And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding)
Lies Here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be Lost;
For it will (as he believ’d) Appear once More
In a New and More Elegant Edition
Revised and Corrected
By the Author.

Franklin wrote the manuscript of his Autobiography four sections at four different times over the last 18 years of his life. (agreeing with his epitaph) The paper itself seemed designed for the recognition and collection of errata: he wrote on folio sheets folded in half to make pages measuring 10x15 inches, then divided these...
sheets folded in half to make pages measuring 10×15 inches, then divided these pages lengthwise to make a two-columned page. Franklin wrote in one column and left the other blank to hold notes, additions, and revisions. Franklin was a meticulous editor: almost every page of the manuscript his memoirs is heavily marked with many words crossed or blotted out.

Within Franklin’s self-edits there were an incredible range of different styles, ranging from simple strikethroughs in graphite pencil to heavily blotted ink. Given Franklin’s thoughts on the second edition of his life, our project aimed to study the content of these errata and Franklin’s attempt (or lack thereof) to obscure and revise them. We began with what seemed like a logical hypothesis: because some corrections were heavier than other, the heavier ones must have been obscuring material that Franklin really wanted to cover up. In actuality, we found no relation between the apparent thoroughness of the correction and the content that the correction obscured. Ben unpacked this hypothesis and resulting conclusion:

*Marks of deletion [in the manuscript] range from a single strike through to a thorough blotting. The extent of the obscuration would seem to correlate with the extremity of Franklin’s desire to change the text. It would make sense that the more passionate he was in his new opinion, the more completely the original would be erased. This theory partly assumes Franklin’s expectation of an audience for his manuscript, but by no means requires it. Writers of even the most private documents often imagine a reader and, more, the extreme erasure is not necessarily pragmatic (preventing a reader from reading the original) but emotional. Indeed, the latter appears to be more the case as every deletion has a work in it that has been diffused into the air of the words making up the text.)*
proved legible, though at times difficultly so: the authors of The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text [Leo Lemay and Paul Zall] have been able to discern the original beneath every mark of redaction. With this hypothesis, that extent of erasure correlates to passion of redaction, it would be expected that stylistic edits receive the lightest obscuration, while ostensibly sensitive material would be removed with the most ink. Franklin would likely less fervorously care about grammatical or stylistic errors: one would think he would not mind a reader also seeing the original. Strangely, however, this theory does not seem to hold. There is no apparent consistency in the severity of his deletions with regards to the type of edit.

In this section Franklin tells of his time lodging with Ralph in Little Britain, London,
,
Ralph’s relations with “Mrs. T—,” Ralph’s move to the country to teach, Franklin’s rebuffed advances on Mrs. T—, and Ralph’s break with Franklin. Ralph and Franklin were good friends before they moved to Little Britain in England together: Franklin recounts “many pleasant walks we had together on Sundays into the woods near the Skuylkill” and, once arriving in England, “Ralph and I were inseparable companions.” Indeed, Franklin inscribed a pamphlet to Ralph, A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain, though he later regretted this, listing it as “another erratum.” Although Franklin and Ralph were “pleasant” and “inseparable” companions, their lives deviated sharply in vocational success upon arrival in England. Franklin was immediately employed at Palmer’s, “then a famous printing house,” but Ralph repeatedly failed to find successful work, borrowing Franklin’s money “to subsist” and to spend on “Plays and other Places of Amusement” after being rejected from possible work as an actor or hackney writer. The expense of Ralph’s prodigal lifestyle kept Franklin unable to pay for his passage back to America to see Deborah Read. The paragraph begins with a number of revisions.

The first two revisions are stylistic, where

In the House with us there

becomes

In our House there lodg’d…

Easy enough. What follows, however, is a major revision: Franklin heavily blots
out “two single” and replaces it with “a young.” A sentence that before had read

_In the House with us there lodg’d two single Women_

was changed to read

_In our House there lodg’d a young Woman_

At first glance, this correction makes it appear as if Franklin is trying to completely obscure the word for the reader: the blotting is much heavier than any other correction on the page and Franklin would have had to move his pen back and forth several times over the page in order for the mark to be so thick. The content of the error is much clearer than would be assumed from such a deliberate action, however: the ascender of Franklin’s trademark miniscule “t” extends above the blot,

and looking at the contrast between “a” in the revision and the lowercase “t” and two other smaller letters which do not ascend above or descend below the x-height, it is obvious that the word is “two.”

Similarly, the blotting of the following word, “single,” leaves extant much of the initial “s” as well as the descender of “g” and the ascender of “l.”

Franklin obviously intended this content to not be a part of his final published memoirs (the blots leave no question), but a reader of the holograph would still be able to discern the text below the blots; that is to say, Franklin’s attempt to obscure the content was still not entirely successful.
obscure the words to readers of a published book is evident, but copy-editors and Franklin’s closest friends and relatives who were privy to the holograph would have, upon close inspection, deciphered the canceled content.

A few sentences later, Franklin describes “Mrs. T—” and her relations with Ralph. Interestingly, he employs heavy blotting in what seems to be a merely stylistic correction.

His sentence begins:

*She was a genteel Person, sensible & lively, and of most pleasing Conversation*

but is changed to

*She had been genteelly bred, sensible & lively, and of most pleasing Conversation*

While it is possible to speculate about other motives for this change, it does seem that style was the deciding factor in this correction. Without the change, the sentence would have two clauses employing the verb “was”; after the change, the sentence reads with variety.

The above are only two of many examples of Franklin’s corrections, but illustrate the arbitrary correction style that Ben and I found in Franklin’s manuscript. The first correction features a heavy blot to obscure seemingly sensitive material. The second uses an equally heavy blot to obscure a stylistic change. While Franklin may have removed “two single” Women in order to make his story about Mrs. T—more coherent and possibly to extract himself from notions of promiscuity, the heaviness of the blot over what would be scandalous content does not completely obscure the writing. Additionally, Franklin’s deletion of the second woman, if she actually existed, does not represent self-censorship or an attempt to make himself appear more chaste or virtuous, because sentences later he confesses to attempting “Familiarities” with her while Ralph, away in the country, has recommended her to Franklin’s care. Franklin also openly confesses to his “intrigues with low women” in a section recounting his return and common law marriage to Deborah Read.

The Penn Manuscript Collective enjoyed a successful fledgling fall semester, and we are looking forward to more study and sessions together this spring!