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WILLIAM GODWIN'S CORRESPONDENCE ON PROOF CORRECTIONS TO *ST LEON*¹

In William Godwin's second novel, *St. Leon* (1799), the eponymous hero has been granted the power to extend life through the fountain of youth and access to unlimited wealth by the transmutation of metals through the philosopher's stone. Sworn to secrecy, St. Leon eventually alienates his family and attracts the suspicions of the communities in which he operates, despite his overpowering desire to do good, leading to a familiar Godwinian spiral of guilt, remorse, and isolation.

After its initial publication in 1799, the second edition of 1800, and third edition of 1816, Godwin was invited to revise the novel for inclusion within the first series of *Bentley's Standard Novels*. The series was initiated by the publisher Richard Bentley, who purchased cheap copyrights for out-of-print novels and reprinted them within a uniform series, which he started publishing beginning on 25 February 1831.² *Bentley's Standard Novels* was a publishing venture in the vein of Anna Lætitia Barbauld's *British Novelists* series or Robert Cadell's *Author's Edition of the Waverley Novels* in that it provided cheap reissues of contemporary fictional works to reach a wider audience. The *Standard Novels* series usually condensed novels into a single volume and issued them on a monthly basis. One of the series' key claims, according to Michael Sadleir, was that "many of the texts therein included were *the texts finally approved by their authors*, or at least provided with prefaces in which the author's mature judgment was passed on early work of his or her own."³ While the new and post-Jacobin framing of Godwin's *St. Leon* arguably attenuated his earlier radicalism,⁴ its inclusion in this series ensured its classic status and theoretically allowed Godwin to produce an authoritative version of the text.

This is why the three modern editions of *St. Leon* all use the 1831 fourth edition as the copy text, though Godwin's letter of 6 June 1831 to Charles Ollier hints that the edition published in *Bentley's Standard Novels* does not completely reflect his final intentions. Ollier was better known as the proprietor of a printing and bookselling business, co-operated with his brother James from 1817-23, which published books of poetry by John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. After the business collapsed in 1823, Ollier went to work for Henry

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² See William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 361; and Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 274.

³ Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Record*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), vol. 2, p. 95.

⁴ See Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 211-12.

Colburn and then Richard Bentley as a literary adviser and reader until 1839. It was in this capacity that he interacted with Godwin.⁵ Godwin's 6 June letter to Ollier warns that in the proof copy there were "half-a-dozen, or half-a-score, blunders, which, if not destructive of the story, are at least very annoying to the author & the critical reader."⁶ *St. Leon* was published less than a month later by 2 July as the fifth volume of *Bentley's Standard Novels*.⁷

None of the proof copy errors that Godwin corrected by 6 June were revised in the published version.⁸ On 6 July 1831, Godwin wrote angrily again to Ollier:

Now it is certainly singular that, *in every one of these instances*, the original nonsense has been carefully preserved, & my corrections uniformly rejected. It is surely enough to make a sober man mad, to see his labour so entirely thrown away, or indeed answering no other purpose than to shew the contempt with which he is treated in Mr. Spottiswood's printing-office. What is the sense of proofs, if this is to be the result!⁹

Caustic diction aside, Godwin's comments suggest some of the harmful and invisible ways that early nineteenth-century printing houses affected authorial revision and intention. Godwin provides a full list of the errata the printers failed to correct during the proof stages interspersed within his criticisms:

- p. 51, line 8. "nobleman" is put for "noblemen."
- p. 84, line 11. "distemper of mind," for "distemper of my mind."
- p. 132, line 4. "puts mind of the giants," for "puts me in mind of the giants."
- p. 200, line 24. "I held it to be a base & cowardly," for "I held it to be base & cowardly."
- p. 208, line 28. "you should violate my engagements," for "you should violate any engagements."
- p. 240, line 19. "had been want only thrown into prison," for "had been wantonly thrown, &c."
- p. 425, line 15. "I had originated in a dream," for "It had originated in a dream."
- p. 444, line 37. The words, "a numerous" are printed twice.
- p. 473, line 11. "I was myself wholly concerned," for "I was myself only concerned."

Godwin alluded to these errata in at least one further letter, of 11 April 1832 to Richard Bentley himself, a final, escalated complaint of Mr. Spottiswood's printing practices: "not

⁵ See Royal A. Gettmann, *A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 189; and Martin P. McNamee, "Ollier, Charles (1788-1859)," *Encyclopedia of Romanticism: Culture in Britain, 1780s-1830s*, ed. Laura Dabundo (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 421.

⁶ William Godwin to Charles Ollier, 6 June 1831, MS G 0127, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, New York Public Library, NY, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

⁷ Its publication was advertised in the Saturday, 2 July 1831 issues of *The Morning Post* and *The Standard*.

⁸ William Godwin, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831).

⁹ William Godwin to Charles Ollier, 6 July 1831, MS G 0134, pp. 2-3, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, New York Public Library, NY, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

one of the corrections of *St Leon* has been made, but all the original errors are faithfully preserved.”¹⁰

Only some of these errors were amended in the modern editions of *St. Leon* and usually silently by the editors. The standard edition of *St. Leon* (1992), published by Pickering & Chatto and edited by Pamela Clemit, silently corrects the errors on pp. 200, 208, 425, and 444, in line with the imprecise scope of changes detailed in the general “Editorial Note”: “Minor changes in grammatical construction and spelling have not been recorded.”¹¹ Clemit’s later edition of the novel for Oxford World’s Classics (1994), on the other hand, specifies all of her alterations; the only errors she corrects are the ones on p. 200 and p. 425, and she lists those in her “Note on the Text.”¹² William D. Brewer’s more recent edition of the novel for Broadview Press (2006) has a similar editorial approach to the Pickering & Chatto version: “Some inconsistencies in quotation mark use, italicization, punctuation, and spelling are silently regularized (question marks are not employed in the 1799 edition).”¹³ Of the nine errors identified by Godwin, Brewer silently corrects those on pp. 51, 200, 208, and 444, and he makes corrections to pp. 240 and 425 in editorial brackets.

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¹⁰ William Godwin to Richard Bentley, 11 April 1832, MS G 0137, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, New York Public Library, NY, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

¹¹ “Editorial Note,” vol. 1 of *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1992), pp. 47-50 [48]; cf. William Godwin, *St Leon*, ed. Pamela Clemit, vol. 4 of *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1992).

¹² William Godwin, *St Leon*, ed. Pamela Clemit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. xxiv.

¹³ William Godwin, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. William D. Brewer (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), p. 45.