

More on “Christmas as Humbug: A Manuscript Poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (‘L.E.L.’)”*

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In the commentary on Landon’s poem “Christmas,” as published in *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94), it is stated that the poem “may perhaps have been published somewhere” as “suggested by the stanza-break marks in the left margin of the ms.—these would presumably have been noted for the use of a printer. But it is of course possible that the poem never appeared in print” (196-97). The bitter poem was indeed published: in *The Literary Gazette*, No. 782 (14 January 1832) 27-28. The date of publication confirms the inference, from internal evidence, that the poem was composed around Christmas 1831, as stated in the article.

The *Literary Gazette* text of “Christmas” was provided by Glenn T. Dibert-Himes (of the Department of English, University of Nebraska—Lincoln), to whom grateful thanks are due. He is preparing an edition of the writings of L.E.L., with texts and bibliographic information on every traceable manuscript and publication of hers, including periodical pieces, and including illustrations, where they occur. The edition will include many works that were never collected for republication in book form, so it will be welcomed by all who are interested in Landon’s oeuvre.

A comparison of the *Literary Gazette* text of “Christmas” with the manuscript text shows relatively few verbal variations; although, I regret to say, three of the verbal differences from the text in *Connotations* reflect my own misreading of Landon’s often-ambiguous

*Reference: F. J. Sypher, “Christmas as Humbug: A Manuscript Poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (‘L.E.L.’),” *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 193-203.

handwriting (lines 3, 17, and 69); now those blunders can be corrected. Most people who have had occasion to deal with Landon's mss. can attest to the difficulty of reading her script. Laman Blanchard, in his *Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.*, 2 vols. (London, 1841), recounts how, when she was a child, penmanship "was a source of extreme trouble to her," and a "kind old gentleman" gave her special instruction; but he soon gave up, saying that she was "a dab at pothooks" (1: 11-12; "dab" is school slang for an "expert," and the term "pothooks" refers to illegible handwriting).

Variations in punctuation between the versions are numerous, which is to be expected, since the ms., as noted in my original article, is very lightly punctuated. But most of those variations are not of particular significance for the meaning of the text; the exception is the placement of the quotation marks in lines 34-35 (see textual notes below). Now that the reference to the *Literary Gazette* text is available, the minor variations can be looked up by anyone interested in pursuing the comparison. The sparse punctuation in the ms. has a certain interest, as an example of how Landon—like many writers of her period—composed, leaving the punctuation to be taken care of by the publisher. I should have noted in my original comments, that in the ms. the stanzas appear with all four lines flush on the left margin (as I have seen in other mss. by Landon), but in arranging the printed version I inserted the indentations on the second and fourth lines of each stanza, following the customary editorial practice of the time; the text as printed in 1832 has similar indentations (this was another matter which the author, in effect, left to the publisher).

In the following notes, line references are to the text of "Christmas," from the manuscript, as printed in *Connotations*. The *Literary Gazette* text has the same number of lines (92 lines, divided into 23 four-line stanzas). In the following textual notes, readings from the *Connotations* text are followed by a square bracket, after which readings of the text from *The Literary Gazette* appear. Editorial comments are in italics, enclosed in square brackets. For the most part I have not noted variations in punctuation. Aside from mistakes in transcription, varia-

tions may be presumed to fall into one of the following categories: editorial alteration, author's alteration, typesetter's alteration or error.

[heading, lacking in ms.; present in Literary Gazette] ORIGINAL POETRY.

[title] Christmas.] CHRISTMAS.

[notation below title, not in ms.; present in Literary Gazette] Irregular Lines.
[this implies that readers expected regular meter, and needed to be alerted if the lines varied from usual patterns; Landon's stanza form follows, with variations, a format familiar from many of the "Olney Hymns" of Cowper and from other English hymns; the fact that her anti-Christmas poem uses the metrical form of a hymn adds to its irony]

3 sang] sung [sung is probably the correct reading, by analogy to rung in the next line; OED (first edition) notes: "sung was the usual form of the pa. t. in the 17th and 18th cents. and is given by Smart in 1836 with the remark 'Sang . . . is less in use'. Recent usage, however, has mainly been in favour of sang" (this part of the dictionary dates from 1910-15)]

15 earth] Earth

17 world] crowd [crowd is correct; my reading of the manuscript was an error]

29 smothered] smother'd


34 On earth we must live as we can / "And] "On earth we must live as we can / And [the ironic tone of the poem is emphasized by the ms. reading, which implies that virtually everyone has to make moral compromises and rationalizations in order to survive]

51 stock] stack [ms. stock is the preferable reading, since stack merely repeats the sense of the word rick in the same line]

62 past] passed [but in line 27 past stands, as in ms.]

63 winter] winter's

65 North] north [the ms. contrasts the lower-case initial of the direction south with the upper-case initial of the geographic region North]

69 grille (*emended from the supposed gwille*) girdle [*girdle is the correct reading; cf. OED, s.v. girdle sb.3.c; I misread the letters because the dot for the i was placed over the first stroke of the letter d—the ms. looks like this: *]

71 slipt] slept [*ms. slipt seems preferable, since it allows for oversight as well as for falling asleep*]

77 Woe] Wo [*woe and wo were both current at the time; ms. reads woe also in line 88, where the first printed text again has wo; OED notes: "The spelling wo has been long prevalent in exclamatory use, and is still affected in poetry" (text from circa 1927)*]

86 winter time] winter-time

90 mirth!] mirth: [*the ms. has no punctuation here; I inserted the exclamation point to follow the exclamatory phrase Then out on . . .*]

92 earth.] earth! [*ms. has a period*]

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