

Mary Anne Rawson's *The Bow in the Cloud* and the Networks of Anti-Slavery Literature

Christopher Ohge

(*Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London*)

A Definitive Object, a Solidity of Purpose

"The plan appears to me very promising, and I hope, and that its success will further the amiable design of its formation—as a publication . . . which though so attractive to the Eye, and in some of their contributions, so touching to the heart, have always seemed to me as wanting a definitive object, a solidity of purpose. . . ."

(*Mary Sterndale to Mary Anne Rawson, 28 February 1833?*)

It turns out that most of Sterndale's literary submissions and suggestions in her letters were not published. Only one poem, "The Slave Ship," was included. Yet Sterndale's characterization of the aims of the *Bow in the Cloud* might be the most relevant, as well as the most indicative, of the textual history of this astonishing collection of materials.

Textual transactions

Many of the poems submitted to Rawson were unchanged. Yet some of the submissions show a significant level of editorial engagement and judgment. For example, Rawson received four? submissions from Bernard Barton, two of which began and ended the volume, and two more appeared elsewhere in the volume. This suggests an attention to selection.

Another textual transaction came with Thomas Hill's submission of "Grave of Wilberforce," a poem that went through several apologies as well as versions. He submitted three versions to Rawson. The final one includes a corrected stanza for "Grave of Wilberforce", ("Conspicuous. . ."), with an explanatory footnote, as well as some additional suggestions for changes that were not adopted. The first fair copy submission is rather interesting, because it includes both minor revisions, as well as a note penciled in at the end of the poem:

Here is the note zoomed in:

My Dear Mrs Rawson

*I am ashamed of the lateness of my
offering, & am perfectly conscious of its . . .*

Yet he submitted another fair copy, which included a revision to the stanza beginning "For lo!"

Has flood that breast, now cold in death—
 How from those lips once florid a breath
 Could lasting sounds move,
 Could still each vessel, could quell each strife—
 Speak ye, who paid him in his life,
 And still his ashes love.

For lo! his disciples to grove,
 The noblest of the British race
 At Britain's call appear,
 And stand around in mournful state,
 While, midst the ashes of the great,
 Descends a Patriot's bier.*

The throne, the Church, their white guide;
 The bar, the Senate, and the Field,
 Have varied honours shed:
 Here Harley's neckrope, Wellesley's might,
Eden, the fount of ancient right,
 And Brumfitt, sweet Friction's friend.

Yet has he won a nobler prize!
 A ransom's nature of the skies,
 He lays his laurels down,
 Where, robed in heaven's all-holy dress,
 He beats a Lucifer's right wing,
 And wears a blood-bought crown.

Chesterfield Aug. 20th 1833 D.H.

My dear Mr. Rawson
 I am ashamed of the lateness of my
 answer, I am perfectly conscious of its unworthiness & appear
 among the productions of those highly gifted individuals whose
 names you once mentioned to me. And if your feelings on this
 subject are in unison with mine, I do beg that you will be
 influenced by no motive of delicacy towards me, but consider this
 humble effort of my muse to its merited oblivion. - Our kindest
 regards attend your circle, & believe me, my dear friend,
 Very faithfully yours F. Hill

Figure 1: Figure 1

Chesterfield Aug. 20th 1833 D.H.

My dear Mr. Rawson
 I am ashamed of the lateness of my
 answer, I am perfectly conscious of its unworthiness & appear
 among the productions of those highly gifted individuals whose
 names you once mentioned to me. And if your feelings on this
 subject are in unison with mine, I do beg that you will be
 influenced by no motive of delicacy towards me, but consider this
 humble effort of my muse to its merited oblivion. - Our kindest
 regards attend your circle, & believe me, my dear friend,
 Very faithfully yours F. Hill

Figure 2: Figure 2

Another clue left in the manuscripts comes from J. W. H. Pritchard's 26 December 1833 letter to Rawson. Pritchard was a contributor to the volume, but in that letter he also played the editor, suggesting changes to Miss Williams's poem (to which himself provided the title "Voice from the Land of Bondage").

Pritchard's next letter from 11 April 1834 is really crucial (see leaf 64 MS414-Box 2). It proves not only that he helped her edit the book, but also that he offered suggestions to Rawson's preface, which were adopted.

The sentence might admit of a change of this kind "It would indeed have been delightful if every *hand which has taken a prominent part [or been actively employed] in pulling down the prison house, & in striking off the fetters of the bondsmen, could have put &c"*

Here is how it was published:

Publication History

While in many ways *BIC* was a publication of Northern writers and activists, it was published by Jackson and Walford (St. Paul's Churchyard).

The book was sold for 12 shillings, about 50 GBP in today's money. Put another way, it was about two days pay for a skilled tradesman, or about the cost of a week's supply of butchered meat and tea. In other words, this was a middle-class product, on the high end of affordability.

The volume is indeed handsome: the foolscap octavo pages were gilt, tightly bound in a turkey morocco binding with a gilded engraving of the bow. The advertisement called attention to its quality.

Reception

The publisher, Jackson and Walford (18 St Paul's Church-yard) was also responsible for the *Eclectic Review*, *The Congregational Year Books*, and other ecclesiastical books. One of the contributors to *The Bow in the Cloud*, Josiah Conder, had since 1813 been the owner and editor of the *Eclectic Review*, which also featured a substantial and laudatory review of *BIC* in its July 1834 issue. This was a significant, since *Eclectic Review* was one of the most prestigious literary periodicals of its time, one that not only published prominent romantics but also American authors such as Washington Irving. The periodical also had a wide American readership (it was reprinted Foster, Bisbee, and Co. in New York).

My Dear Madam

The best emendations
that I can think of you will
perceive by comparing the passages
below with Miss W.'s M. S. I
should certainly begin at the
fourth stanza, & read the piece
thus:

Advice from the Land of
Bondage.

x x x x x x x

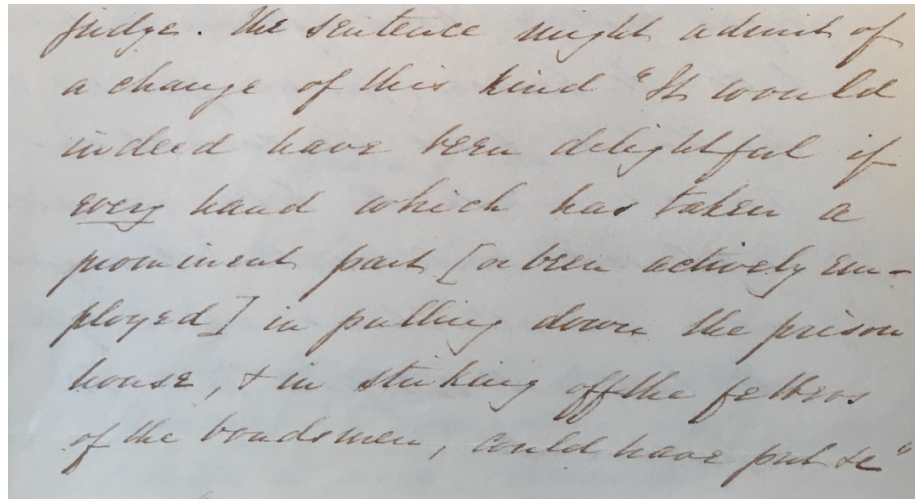
A sound arose &c. —

The fifth line I would write
thus, (a real improvement &)

And thus it ^{spoke} answered —

(leaving out "to a nations quest"
which I fancy is downright nonsense)

Figure 3: Figure 3

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript snippet on aged paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads: "judge. The sentence might admit of a change of this kind 'It would indeed have been delightful if every hand which has taken a prominent part [or been actively employed] in pulling down the prison house, & in striking off the fetters of the bondman, could have put a stone'".

judge. The sentence might admit of a change of this kind "It would indeed have been delightful if every hand which has taken a prominent part [or been actively employed] in pulling down the prison house, & in striking off the fetters of the bondman, could have put a stone"

Figure 4: Figure 4

It would indeed have been delightful if every hand which has been actively engaged in pulling down the prison-house, and striking off the fetters of the bondman, could have put a stone into the monument here erected upon its ruins, to tell posterity where it stood, the curses it contained, and how it fell. To

Figure 5: Figure 5

New Discoveries

Now that it has been established that Rawson exerted significant control of editing the book, it stands to inquire what she decided upon.

Obviously she did not include most of the letter material. The virtue of the accompanying digital edition is that those letters have now been edited and presented as appendices to each submission.

Yet there is more: Rawson chose not to publish every piece she received.

Perhaps the most important of the rejected pieces comes from Dinah Ball, whose poem glorifying Toussaint L'Ouverture must have been too controversial for a volume largely framed around Christian piety, not the violent revolution that is clearly celebrated in the opening stanzas.

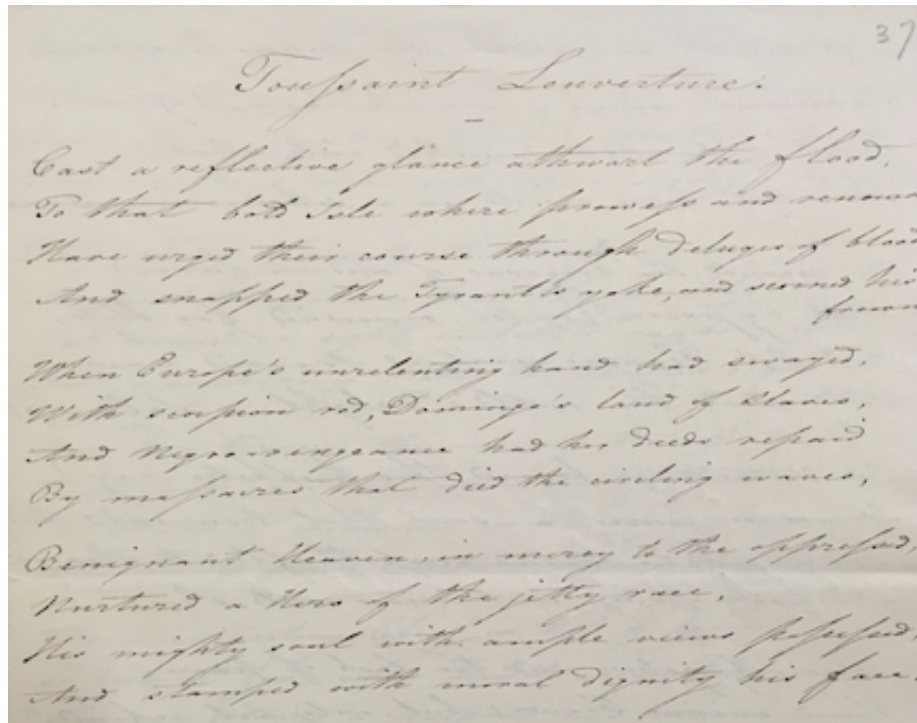


Figure 6: Figure 6

Toussaint Louverture.

*Cast a reflective glance athwart the flood
To that bold Isle where prowess and renown
Have urged their course through deluges of blood,*

*And snapped the Tyrant's yoke, and scorned his frown.
When Europe's unrelenting hand had swayed,
With scorpion rod, Domingo's land of slaves,
And Negro-vengeance had her deeds repaid
By massacres that died the circling waves,
Benignant Heaven, in mercy to the oppressed,
Nurtured a Hero of the [jitty?] race,
This mighty soul with ample views possessed,
And stamped with moral dignity his face.*

The poem encompasses seven manuscript pages, and it is truly a great pity that the poem was left out. For the first time, this edition is publishing this entire poem