

Textual History of “The Assignment”¹

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A poet by heart, Edgar Allan Poe turned to writing short stories because they were more “in demand” by the literary magazines emerging around the country in the first decades of the 19th century. Publishing in magazines was a common practice among American authors at the time for the publishing market was such that the public recognition acquired in the magazines was a *de facto* prerequisite for getting a book published.

Authors of short stories received little money at that time, though, so Poe had to publish a lot just to secure a minimum of material well being. After a very humble beginning, he managed to get himself editorial jobs, which were slightly better paid. By all accounts he was a successful editor, having contributed to considerable increases in the number of subscribers of the magazines he edited. This relative success did not help his financial problems too much, however.

Indeed, Edgar Allan Poe’s work seems to be characterized by two controversial matters: his eccentric personality and his constant lack of financial resources. This latter aspect is highlighted in several of his letters to addressees such as Thomas White, (publisher of the *Southern Literary Messenger*) or Thomas

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978): 148-215.

Chivers, a fellow poet². Be it asking publishers of various journals and magazines to publish his tales and poems (or trying to convince Chivers to invest money into starting their own magazine (letter 145), Poe's career is marked by dependency on the executives of the publishing industry.

On the other hand, it is fair to say that Poe's personality and beliefs did not help his popularity. Poe was, for example, a bitter critic of the so-called "New York literati". When he got the editorial job at the *Southern Literary Messenger* he launched several, powerful, attacks to them. His love of European themes and authors might be one of the reasons for the rivalry, for at the time, American literates (especially Emerson) were emphasizing the need for a truly "American Literature", based on American themes and culture. As noted by Spencer, Poe "opposed while editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (...) the practice of praising stupid books simply because they were American, the attempts then being made to restrict American themes; and he ridiculed the new watchword, 'A National Literature - as if any true literature could be national'" (p.146). Indeed, Poe did not believe that the new nation's writers could afford to ignore their European counterparts. While publishers, such as Thomas White and Lewis Clark, insisted that the literary texts in their journals should be kept simple enough for a humble audience, Poe, who was college educated, strongly believed

²Edgar A Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (Ed. John Ward Ostrom. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1948). Letters 38, 42.

that the American reader deserved better, more sophisticated, texts. “The Visionary”, of course, is based in Venice and is inspired by Byron’s life.

“The Visionary” was first published in *The Lady’s Book*, an often ridiculed magazine aimed at females. *The New York Tribune*, for example, described the magazine as “(...) uniformly filled with thrash”, noting that its editor’s table seemed “(...) written for children under 12 years old and sadly lacks dignity and sense”. Be that as it may, it seems fair to assume that the readership of *The Lady’s Book* was not intellectually sophisticated and had a particular taste for sentimentality and soft-hearted material. As Mott (p.589) points out, “(...) articles on current problems, on politics, on social and economic questions” were “(...) not to be found in (...) [*The Lady’s Journal*, for they were not deemed] suitable for the female mind”.

“The Visionary” was later published in *Southern Literary Messenger*, a reasonably ambitious literary journal based in Richmond, Virginia, whose editorials rallied southerners to “gather around the new standard raised in behalf of literary independence in the Southland” and whose editorials dealt with the hot issues of the time such as slavery and the conquest of the West. A son of Virginians, Poe had gotten the editorial job of the *Messenger* a month before the publication of “The Visionary”. It seems, therefore, fair to assume that the changes he made in the text were aimed to make it more palatable to a ‘more serious and demanding’ readership.

Indeed, when “The Visionary” was published a second time (as “The Assignation”) in the *Southern Literary Messenger* Poe made several significant changes to it. One of them is the supplementation of the quotes he placed between the title and the beginning of the actual story. The reason for this change is, in all likelihood, the audience he wrote for. In an effort to make scandalous elements ambiguous, Poe had set up the first version of “The Assignation” as a romantic love story that veils immoral elements, the major one being an affair between the married Marchesa and the saviour of her child.

Poe’s substitution of the German mottos from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller’s with two lines from Henry King’s “The Exequy” parallels his choice to change the title from “The Visionary” to “The Assignation” when the tale was published for the second time in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835. John Ward Ostrom suggests that Poe was familiar with Henry King’s work from an anthology (167n). The reason for Poe’s decision probably was that the German quotes seemed too romantic for the *Southern Literary Messenger* version of his tale. The “Exequy,” on the other hand, is already tragic by definition of term: “a funeral procession.”³ In his poem King mourns the early death of his first wife. The lines Poe chooses as motto for “The Assignation” functions as foreshadowing of the tale’s course:

Stay for me there, I will not fail

³ *Representative Poetry*, ed. N. J. Endicott, 2003. Department of English, University of Toronto, 2 Nov. 2004 <<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem1160.html>>.

To meet thee in that hollow vale

The couplet gives away to the reader the mysterious end of "The Assination."

The most significant difference between the lines from King's poem and the Goethe and Schiller quotes is that rather than addressing his loved one directly, King does so through objects that represent her, such as the grave, the "hollow vale."

In contrast to the lines from Goethe's ballad and Schiller's play, love is not directly addressed in the quote from King's "The Exequy," which creates a parallel to the alterations Poe made for the second publication of his tale. It seems that for "The Visionary" in the *The Lady's Book* the author decided on a romantic set-up for the story. Bearing in mind his female audience he seemed to deem it more appropriate to create a context of romantic love. The fact that he changed the title of his tale to "The Assination" parallels his decision about the introductory quotes; while the version in the *Lady's Book* emphasizes romantic love, the second publication in the *Southern Literary Messenger* is more scandalous. The title change confirms the scandalous component Poe certainly could not use for his female audience.

It was not only moral issues that might have caused Poe to supplement the Goethe and Chamisso quotes with "The Exequy." He was definitely responding to an educational purpose, too. While he could not assume that readers of *The Lady's Book* would know Henry King, there was a greater likelihood that they would be familiar with Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. The

latter is usually given credit for the line “I have lived, and I have loved,” although Chamisso was the first to use it (Ostrom 166n). Goethe was quoted frequently at that time. Felicia Dorothea Hemans uses lines from Goethe’s work as mottos for her poems, for example, “The Effigies.”

“And if I die, at least I die/*With her – with her*[,]” stems from Goethe’s ballad “Das Veilchen” (“The Violet”). Poe probably read the ballad in the *North American Review* of October 1824 (Ostrom 167n). George Bancroft’s article “Life and Genius of Goethe”⁴ does not give much information about the ballad itself, but provides an English translation of the German text. Poe, in all likelihood, read German and was therefore aware that the original title of Goethe’s ballad makes its subject, the violet, an even smaller matter than the translation does. The German suffix *-chen* functions as diminutive and makes the flower seem even more cute and insignificant than in the English translation. The readers of the *Lady’s Book* were probably not familiar with Goethe’s ballad, as it is not a famous one. Only being presented with the one line Poe chooses as a motto, they were lead to believe that it describes the tragic death of a lover. In actual fact, Goethe tells the story of a violet standing in a field, hoping that a pretty shepherdess will pluck it and press it to her bosom. Instead, the shepherdess steps on the little flower, which makes it utter, “And if I die, at least I die/*With her – with her*.” It seems strange that Bancroft decided to translate “Durch sie,

⁴ George Bancroft, “Life and Genius of Goethe,” *North American Review*. 19.45. (1824): 317.

durch sie"⁵ as "With her – with her" instead of "Through her – through her."

Bancroft's version suggests that the speaker and his beloved die together, which is not at all what the German original expresses. It also does not make much sense, unless the speaker utters the words in the moment of his death. Bancroft's translation of "durch" as "with" makes the quote all the more useful for Poe's purpose of setting the tone for a romantic tale in *The Lady's Book*.

Poe probably knew the lines "I have lived, and I have loved" from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's translation of Schiller's *Death of Wallenstein*. Like Goethe, Schiller was well known at the time when Poe wrote "The Visionary," and he could count on his audience at least having heard of the German playwright and his work. Seen in context, the quote from *Wallenstein* is more tragic than the lines from Goethe's ballad. However, both mottos set a romantic tone by directly addressing love.

Another way of interpreting the modifications Poe made for the second publication of "The Assigment" in the *Southern Literary Messenger* is by reading "The Visionary" as a "clever hoax."⁶ The Schiller and Goethe quotes for the *Lady's Book* are chosen with the intention to make fun of his not very well educated female audience. On account of not being able to write what and how he wanted due to the confinements of the publishing industry, Poe might have

⁵ *Vocal Arts Society*, 1. Nov. 2004 <<http://www.vocalartssociety.org/roster/20041019text.htm>>.

⁶ *Poe Perplex*, 1996, U. S. Naval Academy, 7 Nov. 2004 <<http://www.nadn.navy.mil/EnglishDept/poeperplex/assig.html>>.

simply taken revenge on his readers by choosing the lines from Goethe's ballad as motto for his tale. What makes the Goethe quote ridiculous is that by being taken out of context it misleads the audience of *The Lady's Book* into believing that it is reading about the end of a tragic love relationship, while it actually is about a flower being stepped on.

Conclusion:

Had he not been such an eccentric figure he could have been the darling of American literature in the early nineteenth century. But being who he was, Poe made minimal efforts to play along with those in power of publishing, because playing along for him meant not to be able to write the way he wanted to write.

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