



CRITICISM

VOLUME

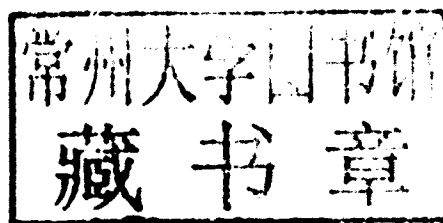
104

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 104

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xi

Thomas Chatterton 1752-1770	1
<i>English poet, satirist, playwright, and journalist</i>	
William Empson 1906-1984	78
<i>English poet and critic</i>	
Charlotte Smith 1749-1806	149
<i>English poet, novelist, translator, and author of children's books</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 361

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 477

PC-104 Title Index 481

Thomas Chatterton

1752-1770

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Probus) English poet, satirist, playwright, and journalist.

INTRODUCTION

Chiefly remembered today as the perpetrator of one of the most notorious literary hoaxes in English literature, involving the invention of a body of work of the fictional poet-priest Thomas Rowley, Chatterton has remained an object of fascination for readers and critics. Championed by the Romantic poets as the embodiment of the suffering and misunderstood creative genius, Chatterton retains critical attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for what his circumstances can illuminate about cultural and literary beliefs, the nature of antiquarianism, and the writing profession in eighteenth-century England.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chatterton was born in Bristol, England, a busy commercial port city. His father, a schoolmaster in a free school and a sexton in the local church, died four months before Thomas's birth, leaving behind an impoverished wife and daughter. In order to provide a livelihood for the family, Chatterton's mother established a school for girls and also took in sewing and needlework. A lonely and precocious child, Chatterton learned to read at an early age but received little formal education. Home-schooled until the age of twelve, he attended a Bristol charity school, then became apprenticed in the law firm of John Lambert. He disliked his job, however, and often neglected his work in favor of writing poetry or reading. He had begun pseudonymously contributing poetry and satires to the *Bristol Journal* as well as to some London newspapers, and he apparently spent countless hours in perusing fifteenth-century manuscripts and drawings in the monument room at the nearby St. Mary Redcliffe Church, where several generations of Chattertons had served as sextons. Chatterton's "Rowley poems" came directly out of his immersion in these texts; in 1768, he announced that he had discovered a vellum manuscript of medieval poems and other writings, composed in archaic English and illustrated with heraldic drawings, written by a poet-priest from Bristol named Thomas Rowley. At first, the Rowley manuscripts were ac-

claimed as an important historical discovery and Chatterton sent Rowley's *History of England* to the prominent antiquarian and novelist Horac  Walpole. Walpole apparently believed them genuine but, beginning to doubt their authenticity given Chatterton's age and level of formal education, returned the work without a reply. Over time, scholars determined that the Rowley manuscripts had been invented by Chatterton—complete with a pseudo-medieval language and original drawings—and that the only truly historic personage in them was Rowley's supposed patron, Bristol mayor and wealthy merchant William Canynge. Chatterton decided to leave Bristol for London in 1770, aided by donations from friends, in the hope of making a living as a writer. He met with minor success and published some poems, satires, and articles (including the "Rowley" poem "Elinoure and Juga") in various London journals, but did not earn enough to live on. He wrote optimistic letters to his mother and sister, and sent gifts to them, but he himself did not have sufficient money to eat for days. Depressed and discouraged, he committed suicide in his room by drinking hemlock. At his death, Chatterton was not yet eighteen years old. He is buried in London and there is a monument to him in Redcliffe Churchyard in Bristol.

MAJOR WORKS

While it is now a widely accepted fact that Chatterton invented the Rowley materials, many critics also point out that his hoax was a brilliant one. Setting the poems in fifteenth-century Bristol, Chatterton used the historical personage of William Canynge as the focus around whom he organized the works of the fictional Rowley. Introducing Canynge as Chatterton's patron, mentioned in several of his poems, Chatterton also presents a circle of other writers and painters drawn from his familiarity with the tombstones in St. Mary Redcliffe Church. In his writings, Rowley thanks Canynge for his generosity and vividly recounts the activities that marked feast days at St. Mary's, the pageantry of the nobility, and lively scenes of peasant life, all against a background of Saxon history. Through Rowley's chronicles, Chatterton explores the actions of warriors, rulers, and saints, and he argues that such merchants as Canynge were heroes in their own right. In "A Brief Account of William Canynge from the Life of Thomas Rowley Prieste," Chatterton develops the role of Canynge by establishing a friendship between poet and patron. Their friendship

begins with Canynge's patronage of Rowley and grows as Canynge recognizes Rowley's literary skill and knowledge of art, giving him a key role in designing St. Mary Redcliffe Church. While money necessarily figures prominently in their relationship, Chatterton associates it with mutual esteem rather than greed. Another Rowley poem, "A Brief Account," is a chatty narrative summary with subtle comic touches. Only a few of the Rowley pieces were published during Chatterton's lifetime, but a full volume, *Poems, Supposed to Have Been Written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and Others, in the Fifteenth Century*, was published in 1777 by Thomas Tyrwhitt, who believed that they were genuine medieval works, although he intimated that he believed the works to be Chatterton's in the second edition.

Chatterton's non-Rowley poems are mainly satirical and address society's iniquities. For example, in "The Whore of Babylon" and "Kew Gardens," he targets influential members of ruling political and religious institutions, indicting the corruption and illegal preferences which he believed to be the cause of his own professional difficulties. In poems ranging from playful satire to bitter invective, Chatterton assumes the stance of outspoken freethinker—a pose that allowed him to vent his grievances, but is considered far less innovative than the persona he created in the Rowley materials. A more personal piece, "The Last Will and Testament of Thomas Chatterton," written a few months before his suicide, has been hailed as an extraordinary piece of black humor, with Chatterton leaving various of his personal attributes to friends and foes. Critics have also praised the lyrical qualities of the Rowley "Songe to Aella" as well as Chatterton's "Ode to Liberty."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics continued to debate the authenticity of the Rowley manuscripts after Chatterton's death, with the predominant opinion that they were indeed forged. Censured as morally reprehensible and untalented at the end of the eighteenth century, Chatterton emerged as an iconic figure in the nineteenth century. Eulogized by such Romantic poets as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, as well as by later Pre-Raphaelites, Chatterton was viewed as the epitome of the tortured, misunderstood genius, rejected by a conventional, materialistic society. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Chatterton has remained an interesting figure to scholars studying the nature of the writing profession and eighteenth-century attitudes toward literary forgeries. Jerome J. McGann, for example, suggests that Chatterton should be evaluated not as a literary figure, but rather as "an

artist whose delight lies in hoaxing and masking." The author of several articles on Chatterton, Nick Groom explores his career in the context of eighteenth-century notions of literary antiquarianism, pointing out that Chatterton was rejected by the literati of his day because he transgressed certain mutually accepted boundaries in his Rowley writings. Beth Lau writes about Chatterton's gift for literary impersonation and she compares him in this regard to Keats; Mary Ann Constantine contrasts Chatterton with Welsh poet Iolo Morganwg, another (more successful) inventor of pseudo history. Analyzing Chatterton's reasons for leaving the city of Bristol to pursue the writing profession in London, Jonathan Barry compares his career with that of novelist and near-contemporary Hannah More, another Bristol native. Chatterton's life and works, in addition, have served as a starting point for more theoretical discussions. K. K. Ruthven, for instance, explores the idea of historical revisionism through Chatterton, while Margaret Russett and Joseph A. Dane write about Chatterton in the framework of Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. Kim Ian Michasiw connects Chatterton's "African Eclogues" with James Macpherson's Ossian poems in order to examine the literary depiction of English identity.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

"Elinoure and Juga" 1769

The Execution of Sir Charles Bawdin 1772

Poems, Supposed to Have Been Written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and Others, in the Fifteenth Century 1777

Miscellanies in Prose and Verse (poetry and prose) 1778

The Works of Thomas Chatterton. 3 vols. (poetry, prose, and letters) 1803

The Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton. 2 vols. 1871

The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton (poetry, prose, letters, and drama) 1971

Other Major Works

The Revenge, A Burletta (play) 1795

CRITICISM

Jerome J. McGann (essay date September 1994)

SOURCE: McGann, Jerome J. "The Infatuated Worlds of Thomas Chatterton." In *Early Romantics: Perspectives*

tives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth, edited by Thomas Woodman, pp. 233-41. Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1998.

[In the following essay, first published in 1994, McGann discusses the Rowley manuscripts and asserts that Chatterton should be evaluated not as a poet, but as "an artist whose delight lies in hoaxing and masking."]

The legend named Thomas Chatterton is less marvelous than the boy it raised, and far less rich or strange than the cultural history that includes the history of the legend itself. Chatterton committed suicide in August 1770. He was not yet 18 years old. With little formal education—seven years in a provincial school, followed by less than three years as a lawyer's apprentice—he left his native Bristol four months before he died to make his way as a writer in London. For at least three and possibly even six years before leaving Bristol, Chatterton was constructing the Rowley materials—creating what purported to be fifteenth-century vellum documents, writing historical and literary texts that he represented as copies made from fifteenth-century documents. According to Chatterton, the originals came from a chest found in St Mary Redcliff. Unlike Chatterton's documentary and textual constructions, the chest was 'real', as was its supposed original owner, William Canynge, a prosperous citizen of fifteenth-century Bristol. And the chest did contain early vellum documents that came into Chatterton's possession and that he (re)used to construct his fakes. The chest eventually became such a celebrated mythic icon that even Dr Johnson heaved himself to the top of the church to view it.

According to Chatterton's mother—one of the more reliable of the earlier witnesses—her son's imagination was fired by the sight of those early manuscripts, in particular an illuminated one. Chatterton threw himself into antiquarian studies—at what age is uncertain. In any case, before he was 15 years old he had amassed a considerable scholarly knowledge of heraldry, early English history and culture, medieval literary styles (both prose and poetry), and the local cultural history of his native Bristol. The knowledge founded his imaginative construction of a literary and cultural world whose central figure was the poet-priest Thomas Rowley.

In the space of some three or four years Chatterton produced a substantial body of Rowley materials. Only a few were actually published in his lifetime, and the corpus at the heart of the controversy—the *Poems Supposed To Have Been Written At Bristol, By Thomas Rowley And Others, In The Fifteenth Century* (1777)—was and still remains as misleading in its way as the hoax that Chatterton tried to carry off. Because this book, edited by Thomas Tyrwhitt, focused attention on the poetry, the authentication controversy continually

swirled around questions of original genius, the literary value of the poems and the character of Chatterton. To the defenders of the authenticity of the poetry, Chatterton could not possibly have produced such poetical achievements at his age. To the sceptics he was a prodigy whose forgeries proved that poetry (as opposed to prose) was properly a vehicle of an early state of cultural development. Eventually Chatterton became the 'marvellous boy', the romantic invention of Cottle, Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The reprint collection of *Thomas Chatterton: Early Sources and Responses*, published in six volumes in 1993, maps the ground of the legend.¹ But the oddly neglected subject in these (often amazing) documents is Chatterton and his conception of himself and his work. A series of fake Chattertons, as it were, get constructed in order to exemplify one or another set of cultural ideas (about poetry, about the relation of writers to society, about the cultural importance of imagination and aesthetic sensibility).

Two matters are crucial. First, by concentrating on the Rowley *poems*, the controversy made it difficult to see that Chatterton's was primarily an ethnographic rather than an aesthetic hoax. The Rowley materials are by no means solely or even primarily poetical, and the aesthetic character of the poetry texts is often not the most important thing about them. Chatterton forged a corpus of heterogeneous works, prose as well as poetry, literary as well as historical. Moreover, the materials were all carefully integrated, with different texts containing information and references that 'authenticated' each other, or that built up some significant aspect of Chatterton's myth of early England and, more importantly, Rowley's relation to it.² **'The Battle of Hastings'** and the fragmentary **'Goddwyn'**, for instance, though minor works from an aesthetic vantage, reconstruct (within a Rowleyan fifteenth-century context) signal events of the eleventh century. They are thus important in a historical and ethnographical perspective.

As we have only recently come to see—because of the publication of *all* of Chatterton's Rowley texts—the point was not so much to invent poems as to raise up a highly concrete world. So Chatterton created various prose texts to fill out a believable historical picture: Rowley's biographical 'Account' of his patron Sir William Canynge; the famous 'Bridge Narrative', which effectively initiated the entire affair; 'Craishes Heraldry', 'Englandes Glorie revyved in Maystre Canynge', 'A Discourse on Brystowe', 'The Parlyamente of Sprytes', 'Historie of Peyncters yn Englande', 'The Rolle of Seyncte Bartlemeweis Priorie', and so forth. These texts came with various notes, often highly elaborate, which further thickened the descriptions. Although several of the authors included in the *Early Sources and Responses*

used these materials, they handled them as peripheral texts, useful for elucidating (or so it seemed to them) the primary issues of aesthetics and document authentication.

Except for '**An Excelente Balade of Charitie**', all of Chatterton's Rowley materials were created before he went to London.³ His move to the metropolis exposes another matter of signal importance: that Chatterton's literary inclinations were primarily satirical. Besides his two long satiric poems '**Kew Gardens**' and '**The Whore of Babylon**', he wrote numerous other shorter pieces, including 'a series of letters to various high personages, assailing them with no little violence' (Dix, p. 195). These letters, which overlap his departure for London, underscore Chatterton's ruling passion: to make a name for himself in the public world of his time. Chatterton was no Keats. He went to London to make his fortune and gain preferment by his writing, and he set his pen to any task that would further his ambition. 'He is a poor author', Chatterton observed of party-writing in London, 'who cannot write on both sides' (Gregory, p. 250). The realms of gold he dreamed of were hard and current. Political writing especially attracted him because of the publicity he hoped it would bring. As soon as he reached London he put himself at the booksellers' service and began hacking away.

The Chatterton legend feeds on the last four months of his life: 'We poets in our youth begin in gladness, / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.' Flushed with hope, Chatterton launched himself with funds of inexperience and self-illusion. So he writes to his mother at the beginning of May: 'Good God! how superior is London to that despicable place Bristol! Here is none of your little meannesses, none of your mercenary securities . . . The poverty of authors is a common observation, but not always a true one. No author can be poor who understands the arts of booksellers.—Without this necessary knowledge, the greatest genius may starve; and with it, the greatest dunce live in splendour. This knowledge I have pretty well dipped into' (Dix, p. 264). He kept up this brave front in his letters to his mother and sister despite the precipitous descent of his fortunes. In three months he would be starving to death, having earned less than 5 pounds from his profound understanding of the arts of the booksellers.

The pathetic tale needs no rehearsing. We ought to realize, however, that Chatterton's touching last letters to his family share an important common element with his Rowley constructions—indeed, with virtually all of his writing. Begun as fantasia, the letters quickly became self-consciously maintained illusions. The July letters are little hoaxes written for his family: 'Almost all the next Town and Country Magazine is mine. I have an universal acquaintance: my company is courted every

where; and, could I humble myself to go into a compter, could have had twenty places before now:—but I must be among the great; state matters suit me better than commercial' (Dix, p. 284).

The situation is easy enough to romanticize in the manner of the Lake poets and their inheritors. One might also be struck, however, by the resoluteness of Chatterton's behaviour—by his utter lack of self-pity and his determination to maintain the public form of his illusion at any cost. On the brink of starvation he buys presents for his mother and sister and sends them home with brave letters about moving among the great. These presents now appear to us like the pieces of forged vellum he earlier gave to his Rowley enthusiasts. They are the concrete proof—the 'external evidence'—supporting the textual representations he was constructing for his family in his letters.

For Chatterton, writing is a means to very worldly ends. This is why we must not separate the satiric writings from the forgeries. They are all of a piece. His daemon is parody, and his work is driven by a profound intuition of the theatrical potential of language as such. Even personal letters—like this to his friend William Smith—turn into imaginative performance (n.d. Dix, pp. 244-5):

Infallible Doctor,

Let this apologize for long silence.—Your request would have been long since granted, but I know not what it is best to compose: a *Hindicasyllabum carmen Hexastichon, Ogdastich, Tetrametrum, or Septenarius*. You must know I have been long troubled with a poetical cephalaphonia, for I no sooner begin an acrostic, but I wander into a threnodia.—The poem ran thus: the first line, an acatalictos; the second, an otislogia of the first; the third, an acyrologia; the fourth, an epanalepsis of the third; fifth, a diatypsis of beauty; sixth, a diaporesis of success; seventh, a brachycatalecton; eighth, an ecphonesis of explexis. In short, an enpynion could not sustain a greater synchysis of such accidents without syzygia. I am resolved to forsake the Parnasian mount, and would advise you to do so too, and attain the mystery of composing smegma. Think not I make a mysterismus in mentioning smegma. No; my mnemosque will not let me see (unless I have amblyopia) your great services, which shall always be remembered by

FLASMOT EYCHAORITT

The last Rowleyan forgery, created just before he left Bristol, was the '**Account of the Family of the DeBerghams**'. This work was part of an elaborate textual hoax designed to gull a Bristol pewterer named Burgum. Appealing to the man's vanity, Chatterton invented a pedigree for Burgum, supposed to have been drawn up by Rowley, 'from the Norman Conquest to this time' (i.e. to the mid-fifteenth century). He even told Burgum that one of his ancestors, a certain John De Burgham, was the author of a fourteenth-century

romance. Chatterton copied out a brief excerpt from the poem and showed it to Burgum, who was—to use Chatterton's apt term—completely 'infatuated' with the text and its representations.

Chatterton worked a similar scheme on a breeches maker of Salisbury named Stevens, and his Rowley texts were all part of a hoax he was perpetrating on various interested Bristolians, in particular the antiquarian Barrett and the literary enthusiast Catcott. Partly Chatterton wanted to get money from his forgeries, partly he was energised by his ability to carry off his remarkable, not to say brazen, deceptions. As one sees from his letters and satirical poetry, he had no high opinion of the people he deceived. And when he went to London, he hadn't the slightest doubt that he would carry the world before him, and get better wages for his work. As he wrote to his mother: 'Had Rowley been a Londoner, instead of a Bristowyan, I could have lived by copying his works' (Dix, p. 270).

One of Chatterton's most extraordinary creations is '**The Last Will and Testament of Thomas Chatterton**', a polyglot work of verse and prose which he 'Executed in the presence of Omniscience this 14th of April, 1770' (Dix, pp. 234-42). Not a little reminiscent of Villon's *Testament*, the work is clearly an outrageous piece of black comedy, though Chatterton's suicide the following August has made critics and biographers chary of seeing it as such, or saying so. The Will proper is introduced with an extended fragment of satiric verse analysing several Bristol characters, including Burgum, Catcott and Barrett.

Gods! what would Burgum give to get a name
And snatch his blundering dialect from shame!
What would he give, to hand his memory down
To time's remotest boundary?—A Crown.

According to the fiction of the text, the niggardly 'prudence of this prudent place' (Bristol) has led Chatterton to his decision to commit suicide 'tomorrow night [15 April] before eight o'clock . . . the feast of the resurrection'. Chatterton gives detailed directions for a tomb of 'six tablets' with various inscriptions in three languages and four different character sets. Then come the bequests, of which the following is a sample:

I give all my vigour and fire of youth to Mr. George Catcott, being sensible he is most in want of it . . . To Mr. Burgum all my prosody and grammar, likewise one moiety of my modesty . . . I leave also my religion to Dr. Cutts Barton, dean of Bristol, hereby empowering the sub-sacrist to strike him on the head when he goes to sleep in church. My powers of utterance I give to the Reverend Mr. Broughton, hoping he will employ them to a better purpose than reading lectures on the immortality of the soul: I leave the Reverend Mr. Catcott, some little of my free-thinking, that he may put on spectacles of reason and see how vilely he is duped

in believing the scriptures literally . . . I leave my moderation to the politicians on both sides of the question . . . I give and bequeath to Mr. Matthew Mease a mourning ring, with this motto, 'Alas, poor Chatterton!' provided he pays for it himself.

The passage helps to explain the virulence of Chatterton's detractors. To many of his contemporaries he was a perverted talent, all the more deplorable for his youth. In that point of view his ideas were reprehensible, and his bold manner worse still.

The text proper of the '**Last Will**' is prefaced by one of the most revealing texts Chatterton ever penned. It is a note dated four days prior to his departure for London (six days after he 'executed' the Will and five days after his promised suicide):

In a dispute concerning the character of David, Mr.—argued that he must be a holy man, from the strains of piety that breathe through his whole works—I being of a contrary opinion, and knowing that a great genius can effect anything, endeavouring in the *foregoing Poems* to represent an enthusiastic Methodist . . . and impose it upon the infatuated world as a reality; but thanks to Burgum's generosity, I am now employed in matters of more importance.

The 'matters of ~~more~~ importance' are his new London projects, which will bring him the rewards he failed to gain in parsimonious Bristol.

The note explains why we ought to see Chatterton not as the precursor of Keats, but a forecast of Poe. Chatterton thinks about writing in the same kind of self-conscious terms as the author of 'Von Kempelen and His Discovery' and the other literary hoaxes, of 'The Philosophy of Composition' and 'How to Write a Blackwood's Article'. If anything, Chatterton seems more calculating, even cynical. It is this cynicism, in fact, which catalyses his naiveté, on the one hand, and his great verve for language, on the other, and brings certain of his literary works very close to greatness.

One such example is '**Aella**', whose naive face—like all the Rowley texts—is pure mask. The work is best read in its entirety—that is to say, along with the three introductory poems that secure the fictive context of the piece. That context underscores the work's contemporary (eighteenth-century) status. It is a topical text, a mannered rhetorical performance much closer (generically) to satire than to its nominal character 'A Tragycal Enterlude'. The work asks to be read simultaneously at two radically different levels. As 'Rowley' observes in his introductory '**Letter to Mastre Canynge**': 'Wee wylle ne cheynedd to one pasture bee, / Botte sometymes soare 'bove trouthe of hystorie'. Like the rest of the work, this comment sophisticates itself to a degree. Largely concerned to elevate the claims of 'poesie' against 'hystorie', which 'Rowley'

sees as exerting an excessive cultural dominance, the 'Letter' completely warps the traditional shape of the argument. For in this case (i.e. Chatterton's poem) the power of 'poesie' comes not from any transcendental pretensions, but from the extreme particularity of its inventive range. Chatterton's antique manner is a better index to what is living and present than it is to what is dead and gone.

Chatterton wrote one Rowley poem, 'The Storie of William Canynge', in which he put his cards face up for the infatuated world. Tyrwhitt describes it as 'part of a prose-work . . . giving an account of *Painters, Carvellers, Poets*, and other eminent natives of Bristol, from the earliest times [to] be published by Mr. Barrett, with remarks and large additions' (*Poems*, p. xxiii). Appropriately for his comic muse, 'The Storie' is a vision poem. It begins, 'Anent a brooklette as I laye reclyned', where the 'I' is understood to be Thomas Rowley, who falls asleep and gets visions of bygone days ('brave Aelle', 'holie Wareburghus', 'Fitz Hardyng, Brit-hrickus, and twentie moe': ll. 15, 31, 35). The visions march down the course of time until Rowley's friend and Maecenas, William Canynge, also 'Ynne visyonne fore mie phantasie dyd goe' (l. 36). As the poet unfolds his culminating 'visyonne' of Canynge, however, the sleeping Rowley turns into an Adam's dream, and begins awakening to his true identity Thomas Chatterton.

In the poem the transition gets marked by the visionary appearance of 'a mayde, / Whose gentle tresses mov'd not to the wynde' (ll. 39-40). Rowley may need a vision to recover Aelle, Wareburghus and the others, but 'Trouthis wordes' (l. 69) come to tell Canynge's storie to the poet.

I'm Trouthe, that dyd decende fromm heavenwere,
Goulers and courtiers doe not kenne mee welle;
Thie inmoste thoughtes, thie labrynge brayne I sawe,
And from thie gentle dreeme will thee adawe.

(ll. 75-8)

These words speak 'trouthe' in a double sense, one for Rowley another for Chatterton. In the poem's fiction Rowley doesn't 'adawe' until the last line (150), but in its text—at the poem's performative level—the Adamic dream gets dispelled with a Brechtian gesture. Preserving the magical apparatus to the end, Chatterton translates Rowley's 'labrynge brayne' into his own. An imaginary figure for the unconscious mind (Rowley's vision) appears as the deliberated rhetorical move of a self-conscious writer. Visionary verse is a game of poetic wit.

The textual formalities may easily remind us of Keats. The manner is very different. This is no 'tender night' of romantic imagination; it is the brainy world of an artist whose delight lies in hoaxing and masking. The line to Oscar Wilde is direct.

Notes

1. Thomas Chatterton. *Early Sources and Responses*, Thoemmes Reprints, 6 vols (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1993); *Poems, Supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley and Others, in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Thomas Tyrwhitt (1777); Thomas Warton, *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley* (1782) and Horace Walpole, *A Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton* (1782); Thomas Tyrwhitt, *A Vindication of the Appendix to the Poems called Rowley's . . .* (1782); Edmund Malone, *Cursory Observations on the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley* (1782) and Thomas James Mathias, *An Essay on the Evidence Relating to the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley* (1783); George Gregory, *The Life of Thomas Chatterton . . .* (1789); John Dix, *The Life of Thomas Chatterton* (1837). Hereafter references in the text are to the author or editor of the volume.
2. As Nick Groom demonstrates in the next chapter.
3. For discussion of the dating of the Rowley Poems see *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton* ed. Donald S. Taylor with Benjamin B. Hoover, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I, xxxvi-xxvii.

Nick Groom (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: Groom, Nick. "Thomas Chatterton Was a Forger." *Yearbook of English Studies* 28 (1998): 276-91.

[In the following essay, Groom explores the nature of Chatterton's forgery, arguing that since the Rowley manuscripts defied eighteenth-century notions of literary antiquarianism, *censure of Chatterton "simply showed the literati closing ranks."*]

At that point Don Giuseppe would explain to him at length how the work of the historian is all deception, all fraud; how there was more merit in inventing history than transcribing it from old maps and tablets and ancient tombs; how, therefore, in all honesty, their efforts deserved an immensely larger compensation than the work of a real historian, a historiographer who enjoyed the benefits of merit and status.

'It's all fraud. History does not exist. Perhaps you think the generations of leaves that have dropped from that tree autumn after autumn still exist? The tree exists; its new leaves exist; but these leaves will also fall; in time, the tree itself will disappear—in smoke, in ashes. [. . .] What we are making, you and I, is a little fire, a little smoke with these limbs, in order to beguile people, whole nations—every living human being . . . History!'

(Leonardo Sciasca, *The Council of Egypt*)

Thomas Chatterton was a forger. What does this statement, this knowledge, mean? Chatterton forged literature: he forged language, he forged scholarly credentials, he forged sources. Yet he was not a mere forger: only the works attributed to Thomas Rowley and his set are called forgeries. Chatterton's other pieces in his two-volume *Works* are literature, as opposed to literary forgeries (in a sense, they are aberrant works in the canon of a forger). This essay will focus on Rowley: is it enough to say that Thomas Chatterton forged the works attributed to Thomas Rowley?

The definition of forgery begs a thousand questions: questions of intention and reception, counterfeit and plagiarism, imitation and pastiche, mimesis and representation. In a word, it always refers to a set of conditions outside the text. It is criminal evidence of authorial intention, or (in the case of the death of the forger) it is an enigma ravelled about the discourses of scholarly opinion. The word anticipates both the problem to be solved, and the solution. But Chatterton, I will argue, produced forgeries-within-forgeries which magnify the clumsiness of attempts to explain away his work, and which radically challenged notions of history and writing in the eighteenth century.

In Chatterton's work, meaning is always escaping into the remnants of things, language bristles like a hedgehog rolled up beneath spikes, or blurs into the scorch marks of decaying manuscripts. The reader is left to puzzle over quills or cinders. Indeed in 'Clifton' (unforged), Chatterton suggests that history may appear to evade its own process by side-stepping into language and then shrouding itself in mildew upon the worm-eaten page. Yet the page itself is rotting away, enacting the very process of time:

O'er the historick page my fancy runs,
Of Britain's fortunes, of her valiant sons,
Yon castle, erst of Saxon standards proud,
Its neighbouring meadows dy'd with Danish bloody
[. . .]
But for its ancient use no more employ'd,
Its walls all moulder'd and its gates destroy'd;
In Hist'ry's roll it still a shade retains,
Tho' of the fortress scarce a stone remains.²

Thus in the shade of 'Hist'ry's roll', we see only the sign of writing having passed, not the language itself. In fact, meaning decays as inevitably as the fragile medium of the medieval manuscript. This essay will argue that the manuscript defied eighteenth-century literary antiquarianism. It was in opposition to the print ideology of scholarship, and so was judged to be fundamentally inauthentic. But the manuscript (especially in the Rowley corpus) inevitably remained a vehicle, a mode of transference, or a metaphor, for history—a version of history that would embarrass literary antiquarianism. The argument draws on my own earlier

work, and has been indirectly inspired by a minor constellation of theoretical essays.³

On 8 February 1777, Thomas Tyrwhitt published the first volume of Rowley poetry: *Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley and Others, in the Fifteenth Century*. The collection contained a selection of ancient poems and dramatic verse, mainly by one Thomas Rowley. These literary remains had been discovered in St Mary Redcliffe Church in Bristol in the late 1760s by a teenager called Thomas Chatterton, a Colston charity boy and an attorney's clerk. Chatterton's father had begun rifling through the old chests in the muniment room in the 1750s, and his posthumous son followed him in these wormy habits. Chatterton, a voracious reader and a prolific writer, claimed in about 1768 to have discovered the works of Thomas Rowley, a fifteenth-century priest, in an old chest in the muniment room over the north porch of the church. The Rowley corpus was enormous, including poems, prose, drawings, and maps, and appeared to be a major literary find. Chatterton had produced more and more examples while living and working in Bristol before moving to London a few months before his death in 1770, either adolescent suicide or dreadful accident. He was only seventeen. Soon after, these 'Rowley Poems' found themselves at the centre of an argument concerning their authenticity, first in Bristol and Bath, then in London. With the 1777 edition, these sparks of doubt were blown into an inferno of controversy which raged for the next two or three decades. It was eventually concluded that the works were all forged by the boy. History was written rather than rewritten.

The proofs were (and in a sense still are) conclusive, and so the story of Chatterton is already anticipated in its telling—anticipated as a story explaining and explaining away the phenomenon of 'literary forgery'. But a doubt remains in the plausible accounts of the eighteenth-century literati, not in the Romantic mythology of Wordsworth and Coleridge and Keats, nor in the postmodern intertextuality of Peter Ackroyd. A single page from the 1777 edition of the *Rowley Poems* presents a riddle. The title-page of Tyrwhitt's *Rowley Poems* highlighted the manuscript status of Rowley: 'THE GREATEST PART NOW FIRST PUBLISHED FROM THE MOST AUTHENTIC COPIES, WITH AN ENGRAVED SPECIMEN OF ONE OF THE MSS.'⁴ This engraving, 'The Accounte of W. Canynges Feast', was a startling image, displaying extravagantly archaic calligraphy, exotic Gothic lettering, and featuring illustrations of two heraldic shields. The visual impact of the document was further enhanced by its position in the volume: facing the printed transcript of 'The Accounte of W. Canynges Feast', which looked desolate in comparison (pp. 288 and facing . . .). The relationship between the typographic text and the unique

engraving of a Rowley manuscript is both fascinating and bewildering.

Despite the sparse image of print compared with the magnificence of the parchments, the form of Rowley on the printed page was still grotesquely strange: Chatterton forged a pseudo-medieval language. He scavenged archaic words from the glossaries of Chaucer and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, and had a Shakespearean talent for comparable neologism and coinage. And he garbed this odd pastiche in an idiosyncratic, supposedly archaic orthography. Chatterton invented a poetic Rowleyan language by doubling consonants, substitutions ('y' for 'i' and 'c' for 'k'), and (indeed like Percy in his *Reliques*) adding redundant 'e's to most words.⁵ Antiquity was guaranteed by redundancy and copiousness, like Gothic architecture (indeed, very like the Gothic of St Mary Redcliffe). All these orthographic oddities were faithfully reproduced in the *Rowley Poems* and *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* (a follow-up volume printed in 1778), and the very lines drew attention to their rough physicality:

Geofroie makes vearse, as handycraftes theyr ware;
 Wordes wythoute sense fulle groffyngelye* he twynes,
 Cotteynge hys storie off as wythe a sheere;
 *foolishly. [Chatterton's note].⁶

For the majority of readers, readers of the posthumous, printed editions, this bizarre language was the most immediately compelling aspect of Rowley. It barked and rasped with a guttural new poetic voice, echoing from the iron depths of fantastic medieval armour, even if it was easily strangled by deft wit.⁷

In his *History of English Poetry* in 1781, the pioneering literary historian and poet, Thomas Warton, modernized the 'Notbrowne Mayde' to challenge Edward Capell's dating of the poem.⁸ This technique of textual analysis was based on the assumption that history was integral rather than superficial to a poem, but was ultimately simply a force acting on language, a factor of linguistic change, a structuring principle: that language is writ on the roll of history and offered the sign of times passed.

The technique was full of all the confidence of burgeoning literary history: indeed it could be seen as its whole rationale, the demonstration of historical change and literary improvement. There was none of the abysmal semantic melancholy that Chatterton suggests in 'Clifton' and elsewhere. In consequence, translation and pastiche were enthusiastically propounded by 'anti-Rowleyans' as demystifiers in the debates about the poems. William Mason deployed the device most tellingly in *An Archeological Epistle to the Reverend and Worshipful Jeremiah Milles* (1782): the 'Epistle to Doctoure Mylles' was a piece of verse describing the controversy and its participants in Rowleyan language,

and the effect was both absurd and hallucinatory. George Hardinge added a little Rowley pastiche, 'To the Dygne Reader' to his play *Rowley and Chatterton in the Shades: or, Nugæ Antiquitæ et Novæ* (1782). The Shakespearean editor Edmond Malone, too, in his pamphlet *Cursory Observations on the Poems attributed to Thomas Rowley* (1782), took delight in rewriting Chatterton's poems: 'Chatterton in Masquerade' was a translation of 'Narva and Mored' into Rowleyan, while 'Chatterton Unmasked' modernized the Rowleyan 'First Eclogue'.

Of most interest is an unsigned letter to the *Public Advertiser*, dated 19 March 1782, in homage to Mason's 'Epistle to Doctoure Mylles' (the pastiche of a forgery). The correspondent suggests that other authors be garbed in 'Archæological Language' to affect a sort of textual alchemy: 'This, however, I would not call *Translation*, but *Transmutation*, for a very obvious Reason.' The opening of *Paradise Lost* and the famous soliloquy from *Hamlet* are offered as tongue-in-cheek examples:

Offe mannes fyrste bykrous volunde wolle I singe,
 And offe the fruicte offe yatte caltyfnyd tre
 Whose lethall taste ynto thys Worlde dydde brynge
 Both mothe and tene to all posteritie.

To blynne or not to blynne the denwere is;
 Gif ytte bee bette wythinne the spryte to beare
 The bawsyn floes and tackels of dystresse,
 Or by forloynnyng amenuse them clere.

Ironically, this transmutation does dazzle us like newly-minted gold as we recognize the familiar in a new radiance. It is reminiscent of R. L. C. Lorimer's recent *Scottish Macbeth*

Whuff, cannle-dowp!
 Life's nocht but a scug gangin, a bauch actor
 as strunts an fykes his ae hour on the stage.⁹

The perspective of the text is strictly from the present looking to the past (sidelong, in the case of Lorimer); history is focused like a spectacle before the gaze of the present. There could be no more powerful demonstration that eighteenth-century literary antiquarianism heralded the genealogy of the perfection of the art of writing.¹⁰ History came of age in the genius of the present.

Having proved to their satisfaction that Chatterton's Rowley language actually supported their theories of linguistic integrity, the antiquarians pursued this theme by considering each word as an object, with its own linear history. Reviewing the *Rowley Poems* in 1777, Ralph Griffiths called them 'Mock Ruins', (although the volume contained no fragments), and in 1782, Warton observed, 'A builder of ruins is seldom exact throughout in his imitation of the old-fashioned architecture.'¹¹ He