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**THE LITERARY FORGERIES OF THOMAS CHATTERTON
AND WILLIAM HENRY IRELAND**

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The paper presents an assessment of the particular proclivity toward artistic expression in the form of literary mystification characteristic of the English literature of the XVIII century, i.e., the era of a significant transformation in thinking patterns, diversified literary styles and specific inclinations regarding the artistic means of representing the past via artistic insight, thereby creating mystifications as ingenious as the Rowley poems of Thomas Chatterton and as mediocre as William-Henry Ireland's Shakespearean forgeries.

Key words: Chatterton; Ireland; literary forgeries; artistic expression; manuscripts.

The question of literary forgeries which dominated the English literary scene in the late XVIII century remains as controversial as it has always been, and oftentimes is centered on two noteworthy artists who became infamous: Chatterton and Ireland. Although both were ridiculed and censured for their literary endeavors, the former, in his artistic expression, was (not without sufficient reason) compared to Shakespeare, Milton, and Gray, thereby setting the precepts of European romanticism, whereas the latter was simply reduced to an object of downright mockery by the formidable scholars of the day. Thus, the thesis of this article is to put forward a sincere attempt to simultaneously clarify the striking similarities and obvious discrepancies between the literary forgeries of Chatterton and Ireland.

Hypothetically, the marvelous poetical compositions of Thomas Chatterton were a stern refutation of a particular observation of Lord Orrery, that «...during the contentions between the houses of York and Lancaster ...no poet or historian of note was born in this calamitous period» [1, p. 321]. It should be rightfully observed that Chatterton (primarily on the basis of sheer mercantile principles) strictly adhered to the then cultural and literary fashion, i.e., the glorious revival of the genuine interest (which seemed to consume the whole nation) in English medieval heritage. Consequently, his ingenious literary forgeries, allegedly written in the reign of Edward IV, fell on fertile ground, convincing the gullible public

that the flames of civil unrest in the distant past did not quite consume the genius of poetry; that sublime poetical productions were feasible, even in those devastating times.

It is indisputable that Macpherson tremendously affected the literary career and the versification of Chatterton, just as the latter molded the fate and the metrical composition of Ireland. The major lesson that Chatterton learned from Macpherson seems to have been this. After Macpherson's *Highlander* had been published in common English pentameters, no one paid the slightest attention. Not being completely discouraged by the apparent lack of interest in his ardent literary pursuits, Macpherson quickly embellished the poem with the mysterious imagery of a mythical age. In other words, the general public «...declined his verses until he showed that they were covered with the dust of antiquity. These examples could not be without effect on the Bristol boy, begrimed with the parchments extracted from the muniment room of St. Mary Redcliffe» [2, p. 15]. Chatterton was fast to get the message – viz., that the verses of the highest merit could be utterly neglected by the mundane public and the literary critics alike, whereas the mediocre, if presented under the guise of old heroic age, could facilitate universal admiration. Hence, unequivocally, «...Rowley's appearance in the garb of a medieval monk was more or less suggested by Alpin's appearance in the garb of a Gaelic hero » [2, p. 15]. Although there is no doubt as to the superiority of Rowley over Ossian, to Chatterton's utter despair, the obscure cleric did not touch the same cord of national sympathy as the warrior.

The literary and artistic significance of the Rowley poems is quite evident from the fact that these compositions were able to defy and perplex a number of literati, i.e., distinguished scholars, solemn deans, and reputable antiquaries, hence, making them engage in philological and literary altercations to detect whether Thomas Rowley was a shadow or a substance. Although, in some instances, the language of the Rowley poems is absolutely unintelligible (Chatterton would simply coin words to fit the rhyme), nevertheless, it is very dramatic and affecting, and, to a certain degree, the merit of these compositions «...consists in the music of versification, the classical elegance of the diction, and the appositeness of the phraseology to express the ideas conveyed; ... in the similes Chatterton pilfered from the poets of Anne and of Queen Elizabeth, but which he in such wise improved, that they may be regarded as his own» [2, p. 17].

Unambiguously, the artistic quality of the Rowley poems is not in their historicity, or in the plot development, but in the excellence of artistic expression for

which Chatterton had nobody to thank but himself. His ingenuity and perseverance as a forger of documents and medieval literature, combined with immense intellectual energy which collects, assimilates, amplifies and animates; his acute imagination, and an almost congenital predisposition to English poetry, «...enabled him to carry into execution his darling scheme of producing works that should astonish the learned» [3, p. 272].

In the late XVIII century, prevalently at the behest of David Garrick, a total cult of Shakespeare had emerged, thereby giving rise to a number of fraudsters who conned the credulous public by counterfeiting previously unknown works allegedly ascribed to the Bard. The remarkable literary felony, which began in 1794, featured the forgeries of William-Henry Ireland, who (with a certain amount of ingenuity) tried to palm off some deeds and texts as genuine Shakespeare manuscripts which the former miraculously discovered from an enigmatic gentleman, referred to as «Mr. H.»

Ireland's literary misadventures were directly inspired by Chatterton's Rowley poems which Ireland regarded as the best model of artistic expression and went so far as to contemplate suicide in the manner of Chatterton – viz., the death of a neglected genius. Just as Chatterton embarked on the perilous path of forging history by concocting a genealogical deed for the bookseller Burgum, so did William-Henry, in a fit of truly Chattertonian excess, commence on his way to infamy by creating a fraudulent deed of gift from Shakespeare to an imaginary ancestor, named W. H. Ireland!

Amongst numerous proofs, discrediting Ireland's misguided efforts, was (just as in the case of Chatterton) the matter of orthography for William-Henry based all his spellings on Chatterton's Rowley. This is particularly evident from the abovementioned deed of gift: «I William Shakespeare ...doe make ande ordeyne thys as ande for mye deede of Gyfte for inn as muche as life is mouste precyouse to alle menne soe shoulde bee thatte personne who att the peryle of hys owne shalle save thatte of a fellowe Createure» [4, p. 259]. Likewise, Ireland proceeded to convince the world of the formerly undiscovered Shakespeare compositions by penning *Verses to Anna Hatherreweye*, *Henry II*, *The Tragedye of Kynge Leare*, *Hamblette*, as well as miscellaneous annotations supposedly by Shakespeare himself.

Possibly, Ireland's most ambitious literary fabrication was *Vortigern*, a tragedy which was received with so much initial zeal and assurance that it was conceded as a special favor (which ended in disaster) to Drury Lane. Just as Chatterton managed to dupe a number of literati into accepting the alleged authenticity of the

Rowley poems, so did Ireland initially succeed in persuading some literary authorities – involving Herbert Croft, James Boswell and (stunningly) the Prince of Wales!

Many a notable literary critic (Thomas Tyrwhitt and James Boaden, just to name a few) entered the fray by producing incontrovertible evidence of Ireland's pretended originals, but the most impressive critique, destroying the myth which Ireland had begotten, came from Edmond Malone. It is largely due to Malone's formidable *Inquiry* that the credulous public beheld to their astonishment the tremendous influence of Chatterton on Ireland, and with how little talent and ingenuity of the latter they had been tricked.

In haphazardly penning *Vortigern*, Ireland's major error was to adhere to the myth of *Vortigern and Rowena* as meticulously as if he were following actual history, hence there is a lack of authentic characters and witty interludes – viz., the whole production seems like a complicatedly contrived work of sheer grave nonsense.

Concerning the antecedent arguments, a conclusion must be made – in his adamant prosecution of a literary forgery, Malone found in the dramatic Rowley poems a brilliant superstructure of fiction bordering on literary genius, but with regard to Ireland he «... expressed despair at the young forger's ignorance of many different conventions, from the handwriting practices of Shakespeare's era to the proper modes of address to different ranks of aristocrat» [4, p. 259].

Being fascinated with Chatterton to the point of obsession, William-Henry Ireland tried his best to do for Shakespeare what Thomas Chatterton had accomplished for Thomas Rowley. Explicitly, Ireland and Chatterton were the same, i.e., both were outstanding literary impostors, whereas implicitly, they were drastically different, i.e., Ireland's dull and mediocre forgeries went down in history as superfluously contrived objects of contempt and insipid style, while Chatterton's Rowley poems exhibited a profusion of melodious passages, resonating with such sensuous and sublime beauty as England had rarely read before.

Bibliographic references

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