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THE LITERARY FORGERIES OF THOMAS CHATTERTON AND JAMES
MACPHERSON

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The article is focused on some significant aspects pertaining to ingenious literary mystifications of the two XVIII century masters, i.e., Thomas Chatterton, forger of genealogies, histories, deeds, treatises, letters, and the *Rowley Poems* supposedly originating from and describing medieval England, and James Macpherson, connoisseur of literary artifacts, and creator of *Works of Ossian* which he claimed to be his mere prose rendering of orally transmitted ancient Scottish lore of the Highlands and the Hebrides. Originality and novelty of the results of the research reveal a notion about the necessity for the intellectual history of literature to focus not only on traditional texts and literary sources, but also not to ignore the erroneous and fabricated ones.

Key words: Chatterton; Macpherson; literary mystification; recondite; ancient; forgery.

Literary mystification is just as old as any literary history. Two very important ancient forgers must be mentioned here, i.e., the mythographer and logographer Acusilaus of Argos and the historian Ctesias of Cnidus. The former constructed his intricate account of gods, demigods, and illustrious heroes by claiming that it derived from some bronze tablets which were discovered by his father in their garden, thereby creating a paramount scenario of Western literary mystification, the story of some ancient text found in some place, diligently transcribed, and now lost under mysterious circumstances. The latter arduously defended his version of Persian history – one which was at odds with the generally accepted version provided by Herodotus – by constant assertions that it came from the ancient documents which he discovered in the (now inaccessible) archives of Susa, thereby providing the subsequent generations of forgers with a fervent claim to have consulted recondite official documents, written preferably in an obscure language.

The practice of literary mystification flourished and continued throughout the ages. In the XVIII century, both James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton resorted to the traditional means – reference to allegedly archaic manuscripts and

spelling on the one hand, the assertion to have transcribed from no longer extant originals in a recondite language on the other – to reinvent the medieval history of Britain with such artistic expression and romantic emotions unrivaled by many an ancient classic. So, the thesis of this article is to draw the parallels with apparent similitudes, whereas contemporaneously specify the striking differences between the literary forgeries of Chatterton and Macpherson.

In 1760, the then talented twenty-three-year-old Macpherson, already a graduate of Aberdeen trained in classics and fluent in Gaelic, caused a national sensation by publishing *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. In his preface to this edition, Macpherson claimed that «...he assembled these specimens of ancient Scottish poetry from unspecified sources in the Highlands before translating them into English prose» [1, p. 112]. Shortly after, the public's thirst for Celtic history was quenched with *Fingal* (1762), followed with *Temora* (1763) and, ultimately, the culmination of these volumes, *The Works of Ossian* (1765). Macpherson, never bashful to pose himself as the lucky savior of ancient poetic beauty, stressed on multiple occasions that if he had not transcribed and translated those epic poems, they would have been forever lost to posterity.

If it is possible for a moment to disregard the fraudulent nature of Macpherson's sources, one can marvel instead at his elaborate skill in producing cadenced English verses which recreate the atmosphere of ancient Celtic legends: «My love is a son of the hill. He pursues the flying deer. His grey dogs are panting around him: his bow-string sounds in the wind. Whether by the fount of the rock, or by the stream of the mountain thou liest; when the rushes are nodding with the wind, and the mist is flying over thee, let me approach my love unperceived, and see him from the rock» [1, p. 117 – 118].

Unequivocally, there is the presence of a druidic world in this segment, whilst the rhythmic and lucid flow resembles the enchanted beauty of the King James Version of the Psalms. The declaratives at the beginning intensify the speaker's longing desire to see her lover at close proximity while the latter hunts the deer. The grammar itself becomes imbued with living attributes, i.e., «flying», «panting», «nodding» which speaks of the speaker's wish to remain unseen. Furthermore, «... the archaic touches, including the pronoun «thee», the verb form «liest», and the subjunctive «let», strengthen the illusion that this scene belongs to time immemorial» [1, p. 118].

Although Dr. Johnson in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* famously discredited the authenticity of Macpherson's literary sources, the Ossian compositions «... won their creator not only fame but a series of impressive jobs

and pensions that transformed a poor young man forced to do literary odd jobs into a member of the social as well as literary establishment» [2, p. 38]. This was not the case with that most neglected and impoverished of forgers, Thomas Chatterton.

When Chatterton was not yet ten, he meticulously perused the then notorious *Fragments of Poetry* which were causing a national furor in the world of letters and dividing it into two hostile camps. His voracious and tendentious reading was soon to produce miraculous results.

Unlike Macpherson, the Marvelous Boy of Bristol already apprehended some basic precepts essential for a successful literary mystification. These principles have not changed greatly over time. First of all, the forger should create the adequate appearance for his supposedly genuine text – viz., the linguistic appearance and the physical appearance of the document which belongs to an earlier historical era. In other words, the forger should envisage how this text really looked like when it was produced and how it must look like now. The last detail the forger is confronted with is expounding where the document came from and how it is related to the rest of authentic documents. This is what Anthony Grafton concludes, concerning the essential requirements for a successful mystification: «Imagination and corroboration, the creation of the forgery and the provision of its pedigree: these deceptively simple requirements are almost all that a forger has to meet» [2, p. 50].

Hence, Chatterton, painstakingly adhering to all those precepts, was able to construct an entire imaginary world filled with majestic medieval castles with grand gates and impressive walls, towering Gothic cathedrals with chiming bells, minstrels singing ballads, and noble effigies of prominent statesmen and clerics; «...he gave each of these structures a physical form in sketches and a continuous history in accompanying documents» [2, p. 51].

Having acquired an aptitude for anachronisms by steadfastly studying both Bailey's and Kersey's dictionaries, along with Chaucer's *Poems and Glossary*, Chatterton assembled a reconstructed pseudo medieval language, relying upon hundreds of recondite and obsolete words, most of which fallen out of use since the XV century, and a unique spelling, distinguished by its heavy use of extra consonants, along with unusual vocalization. A specimen of Chatterton's poetry, ascribed to William Canynge, the patron of Thomas Rowley, will convey an impression of period flavor:

Maie Selynesse on erthes boundes bee hadde?
Maie yt adyghte yn human shape bee founde?

Wote yee, yt was with Edin's bower bestadde,
Or quite eraced from the scaunce-layd grounde,
Wan from the secret fontes the waterres dyd abounde?
Does yt agrosed shun the bodyed waulke,
Lyve to ytself and to yttes ecchoe taulke? [3, p. 270].

The language of this fragment is sufficiently archaic in its appearance and abounds with anachronisms: «selynesse» – happiness; «adyghte» – clothed, dressed; «bestadde» – lost; «eraced» – erased; «scaunce-layd» – uneven; «agrosed» – frightened. The consonants, multiplied in all directions, together with the use of the «es» of the old genitive case, as in «erthes», and the old plural, as in «boundes», «waterres» and «fontes» invoke a realistic atmosphere of late medieval England. Indeed, Chatterton's adoption of archaic spelling was of great assistance in finding rhymes.

Many of the *Rowley Poems*, produced by Chatterton, were written on parchment and antiquated by dyeing (he used candle fire, ochre and tea to create a brownish appearance of the writing and page alike, or he would merely crumple the document and rub it on the ground). Consequently, the final result struck many people as hundreds of years old.

Reflecting upon the preceding arguments, a conclusion must be made – the forging techniques which both Macpherson and Chatterton resorted to, were not invented but rediscovered (the whole idea that a period-oriented literary mystification must have a recondite and anachronistic language, for instance, was known to Annius of Viterbo almost three centuries before Chatterton) since traditional forms of artistic expression failed to give the desired impression.

The sweeping popularity of *The Works of Ossian* developed simultaneously along with a raging controversy – one which is akin to the *Rowley Poems* harsh debate – about its supposed authenticity: a pivotal point for the understanding of Romanticism. It seems only reasonable to assert that had Macpherson been able to prove the historical existence of the poet Ossian, then *The Works of Ossian* would have not been met with such hostility and indignation. The same principle can be justly applied to the connection between the XV century cleric, Thomas Rowley, and Chatterton.

All in all, it is necessary to mention that despite having resorted to forgery, both Macpherson and Chatterton were, certainly, great and original poets and their pseudoarchaic texts belong to one of the most profound examples of poetic achievement and, by all means, have an immense literary value to civilization.

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3. *Chatterton Thomas*. The Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton. Vol.2 / Thomas Chatterton. / Ed: W. Skeat. London, 1872.