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0521850789 - Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Authenticity, 1760-1845

Margaret Russett

Excerpt

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It has long been recognized that eighteenth-century Britain abounded in sensational literary and cultural discoveries. Markets in novelties and knowledge expanded to absorb the wonders compassed by the imperial embrace. And with burgeoning commerce came “all specimens of man, / Through all the colours which the sun bestows . . . from remote / America, the hunter Indian; Moors, / Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese, / And Negro ladies in white muslin gowns” (*Prelude* vii:236–43). Omai was neither the first nor the most celebrated exotic informant to reach the metropole. As early as 1704, the language and topography of East Asia were authoritatively documented in *A Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*, written by a native of that island who had settled in England after circumnavigating the globe. Nor were the antipodes the only fields open to the intrepid. The revival of interest in indigenous traditions meant that treasures could be unearthed much nearer home. Gaelic poetry finally received its due with the 1761 translation of a lost epic dating from the third century AD. Within a few years of this revelation, an aristocratic dilettante would find and publish a twelfth-century Italian romance, while an obscure law-copyist in Bristol disclosed a yet more remarkable collection of poems, plays, and historical treatises by an unknown fifteenth-century monk. The greatest scholarly triumph, however, was reserved for the mid-1790s, when two forgotten plays by Shakespeare were uncovered in a private gentleman’s cache of discarded law documents.

With the turn of the century, popular sensations took on an increasingly marvellous character. Extraordinary women began surfacing among the scenes of everyday life. A millenarian preacher conceived at the age of sixty-three, while another elderly spinster subsisted for years on no food at all. A waitress from the Lake District became an overnight celebrity, inspiring ballads, plays, novels and biographies, when she was suddenly

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translated into the wife of a peer. In a replay of eighteenth-century social history, an Asian princess, evidently kidnapped by pirates from her island home, mysteriously appeared in the suburbs of Bristol. Fictional women attracted their own share of attention, some of it untoward; Coleridge's scandalous poem "Christabel," for instance, caused fits and hallucinations among readers long before it was published – apparently the effects of a spell found in Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, which Coleridge was rumored to have copied. Imaginary people could be dangerous in other ways, too; one killed a London editor in a duel. Another scandal ensued when the mummified corpse of a century-old suicide, along with a journal describing its author's satanic persecution, was disinterred by an illiterate shepherd and advertised in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Continuing this spate of well-publicized possessions, the spirit of Lord Byron transmigrated to the body of a rural laborer who began composing the sequels to Byron's unfinished narratives, *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*.

It was indeed an age of wonders, though none of these events transpired exactly as I have described them. They were occasioned by a number of inventive and resourceful persons, each of them abetted by a willing public, during the period that enshrined the ideal of original genius associated with Romanticism. Retold according to the conventions of empirical literary history, the anecdotes should go something like this: a French conman calling himself Psalmanazar, and posing as a native of a country he had never visited, published a fictitious ethnography complete with invented language and alphabet; upon his exposure, Psalmanazar entered on a career of hack-writing that included the article on Formosa for the *Universal Dictionary*. James Macpherson, an upwardly-mobile young Scot hoping to make his name in literary London, pieced together assorted Scottish tales and ballads, arranged them into classical epic form, and attributed them to the bard Ossian who may have lived three hundred, but certainly not one thousand, years earlier. Horace Walpole published, anonymously, the first "gothic" novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, on Christmas Day of 1764; a few months later, he reissued the story under his own name, with a preface that described it as "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern."¹ A charity-schoolboy named Thomas Chatterton won posthumous fame for his pseudo-medieval poems, painstakingly copied onto "antiquated" parchments, after committing suicide at the age of seventeen. A Chatterton wannabe called William-Henry Ireland forged a series of legal papers, and then two plays, widely accepted as the work of Shakespeare; after the

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disastrous single performance of *Vortigern and Rowena* and a withering critique by the textual authority Edmond Malone, Ireland survived by riding the wave of his *Confessions*. The frenzy of publicity generated by this last debacle elicited a tribute from the poet William Mason:

Four Forgers, born in one prolific age,
 Much critical acumen did engage.
 The First was soon by doughty Douglas scar'd,
 Tho' Johnson would have screen'd him, had he dar'd;
 The Next had all the cunning of a Scot;
 The Third, invention, genius – nay, what not?
 FRAUD, now exhausted, only could dispense
 To her Fourth son, their three-fold impudence.²

Among the avid followers of the Shakespeare story was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who reprinted an article on the discovery in his 1796 periodical *The Watchman* and boasted to Robert Southey a few years later that he had “ample materials for a most interesting Historical & Metaphysical Essay on Literary Forgery from the Hymns of Orpheus which deceived Aristotle to the Vortigern of Shakespere that deceived Dr Parr – but Dr Parr was the greater Booby” (*CL* 1:585).³ Coleridge’s earliest literary experiments – Ossianics imitated from Macpherson, a “Monody on the Death of Chatterton” published in Sharpe’s 1794 edition of the Rowley poems – attest to his intense interest in the question. The neo-Chattertonian author of that “ingenious forgery” and fantastic travelogue “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere,” Coleridge imbibed from Ireland and his brethren a lasting fascination with copies, counterfeits, imitations, and the boundary between “illusion” and “delusion”; he himself figures directly or indirectly in most of the tales that follow.⁴

The year 1805, in which Ireland issued his *Confessions*, also saw the publication of Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, a pseudo-medieval romance composed under the spell of Coleridge, although its precursor would not see print until 1816 – at which point Coleridge feared being suspected of “plagiarism . . . from [him]self” (*CP* 187). While “Christabel” languished in manuscript, Coleridge, reporting for the *Morning Post*, broke the story of a bigamous forger and impostor who, as “The Honourable Alexander Augustus Hope,” married a local beauty named Mary Robinson, herself already a noted tourist attraction. In a climate of media spectacles like Joanna Southcott’s virgin pregnancy and the miraculous survival of “the fasting woman of Tetbury,” a runaway servant achieved unlikely celebrity when, in 1817, she managed to convince the gentry of

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Bristol that she was Caraboo, princess of the imaginary Asian island of Javasu.⁵ John Scott, editor of the *London Magazine*, lost his life in a quarrel over the use of fictional bylines and “personalities” in the rival publication *Blackwood’s*. A few years later, James Hogg, an actual shepherd as well as a regular contributor to *Blackwood’s*, published *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* after a letter announcing the discovery of a “Scots Mummy” appeared in that magazine. Two decades further on – shortly before Icodad George Gordon De Luna Byron, alleged “natural son of the poet,” published his notorious *Inedited Works of Lord Byron* – another peasant-poet, John Clare, began writing poems with Byronic titles under the apparent conviction that he was in fact Lord Byron, reincarnated.

Some of these stories are better known than others, but a premise of this book is that each becomes more compelling, rather than less so, when the manifest narrative is excavated for the truth of its production. Great deceptions and minor scandals alike offer glimpses of the cultures that gave rise to them. In the more circumstantial narrations that follow, I focus primarily on the effects rather than the causes of the epiphenomena I describe. A short list of contributing factors must surely include the literal and figurative mobility achieved through international trade and colonial expansion; the rise of ethnographic discourse consequent on increasing contact with non-Anglophone cultures both within and without the British Isles; the dramatic material transformations of the literary market; the accompanying revaluation of the vernacular canon; and the new model of personhood associated, by J. G. A. Pocock and others, with the development of a credit economy.⁶ The ideology of self-making synonymous with commercial society found a philosophical grounding in Lockean empiricism, a point to which I return in Chapter 1.

Assuming rather than arguing much of this broader context, but dealing in turn with an array of particular manifestations, the case studies that follow examine how factitious discoveries and counterfeit beings helped to define the frontiers of literary discourse during the period in which “literature” assumed its modern disciplinary meaning. Beginning with the so-called golden age of forgery in the 1760s and continuing through canonical Romanticism and its aftermath, this book explores the relationship between literary and psychic origins by examining how fictions of textual creation articulate with the construction of Romantic subjectivity. The archaeology of the spurious clarifies the authenticating devices of the Romantic literary work, while also suggesting how canonical narratives of individual development naturalized the tropes of forgery

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and imposture. In particular, I focus on how spectacular fakes participated in defining the “fictional identity” bequeathed to the modern subject by Romantic culture. The deliberately ambiguous term, fictional identity, links two apparently unrelated phenomena: the philosophical notion of “personal identity” that began in the eighteenth century to displace both soul and lineage as the foundation of the individual; and the question of literary ontology – or the “identity” of fiction – that motivates Romantic and post-Romantic literature.⁷ These two threads interweave in an account of authorial identity as the projection of reading practice: Wordsworth’s “second self,” understood as a “formal . . . impersonation” of the originating consciousness.⁸ Poetic identity, even and especially in the honorific mode called “authenticity,” is a *fictional* construction, but this does not make it false. Indeed, I will ultimately suggest that the acknowledgment of subjectivity *as* fiction is an ethical condition of authenticity in its fully Romantic sense. My thesis, then, is that modern subjectivity should be understood as a subset and, to some extent, as a precipitate of the representational practices the Romantics called “romance” but which, in their derogated forms, also go by such names as “imposture,” “forgery,” “plagiarism,” and “delusion.”

This point is made with hallucinatory clarity by Thomas De Quincey, whose confessional life originates with the discovery that the assumed priority of the natural over the represented person is itself a species of legal fiction. As a young vagrant in London, hoping to cash in on his father’s will, De Quincey found that it was easy enough to verify his “account of his expectations,” much harder to prove that he was the person named in the relevant documents. “It was strange to me,” he muses, “to find my own self, *materialiter* considered (so I expressed it, for I doated on logical accuracy of distinctions), accused, or at least suspected, of counterfeiting my own self, *formaliter* considered” (*Confessions* 25). The empirical *man*, in other words, must be regarded as a more or less persuasive imitation of the textual self, or *person*. The same argument, generalized, has been made more recently in the post-structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s. My own contribution is to explore how an ethics of representation, a cultural politics of fantasy, and a specialized understanding of literature unfolded from versions of this insight. Thus this book participates in the larger project of historicizing authenticity, by arguing that the term assumes its modern sense and importance in conjunction with the disappearance of the referent that characterizes Romantic and post-Romantic culture.⁹

To suggest that identity per se is an imposture has admitted polemical appeal but also raises a number of rhetorical and taxonomic difficulties.

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I am, first of all, using the word “identity” to refer not only to social actors and their representations but also to the quiddity of texts. My account of the traffic between “Christabel” and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, for example, explores the properly literary problems of metrical form and poetic “voice” in terms of how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century copyright law defined “the *Identity* of a literary Composition.”¹⁰ The word “identity,” used here to mean not “sameness” but “distinguishing characteristics,” turns out to raise all the epistemological problems associated with defining “personal identity” in the Lockean tradition: the relations of body to soul (or “material” to “immaterial” essences), of part to whole, of incremental change to continuity of existence, and so forth.¹¹ My first chapter considers Locke’s position on identity of consciousness as it pertains to the social regulation of identity threatened by imposture. Yet while recourse to the idea of identity, whether in the social or the literary realm, generally constitutes a defense against *essential* ambiguity, I do not mean to negate all distinctions between the fake and the genuine. One submerged theme of this book is a critique of the representational assumptions at work in identity politics, but I am profoundly interested in the production and reproduction of identities – focusing, however, on authenticity as a function of cultural transmission.¹² To state this point more simply, I consider authenticity as effect rather than cause.

There remains the problem of how to organize and discriminate among the various experimental and transgressive practices that cluster under the Romantic heading of romance. The Coleridgean association of “persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic” with the phenomenology of “delusion” (*BL* II:6) answers my wish to keep aesthetic questions in continuous dialogue with social, psychological, and ethical ones; “delusion,” with its overtones of fanaticism and its suspension between the objective and the subjective, shuttles deftly among these different registers. The word was routinely used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a synonym for “fraud,” the criminal deception of one person by another. John Hatfield, the impersonator of “Alexander Augustus Hope,” was adjured at his sentencing to “lay aside . . . [his] delusions and imposture and employ properly that short space” remaining to him.¹³ The antithetical sense of the term entered the history of aesthetics when Coleridge made the “willing suspension of disbelief” hinge on the distinction of consensual “*illusion*” from psychotic “delusion.” The “*negative* faith” we accord to truthful fictions requires that we be neither imposed upon nor insane (*BL* II:6, 134). The traversal of such distinctions, too, will be a repeated theme of this book, which explores how the dialectic of

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“illusion” and “delusion” in Romanticism contributes to the canonization of authentic literary and personal identities. For now, I will only observe that delusion serves as the foil for both fiction and forthrightness, while it also suggests a Romantic language for the experiential paradoxes that psychoanalysis subsumes under the rubric of fantasy. Both delusions and frauds occupy a discursive register quite distant from “hoax,” a word that first appeared in written English around 1800 and signifies, according to the *OED*, “an amusing or mischievous fabrication or fiction”: in essence, a practical joke. The verb “to hoax” was apparently devised to negotiate the grey zone between criminal and artistic deception associated in the early nineteenth century with the sharp literary practices of periodicals like *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Because it implies a recuperable transgression rather than a legal offense, I have appropriated the word for Mary Baker’s performance as Caraboo.

Other key terms share the transitional ambiguity of “delusion.” “Romance” itself, Freud’s term for fantasies of origin, is defined in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* as both a literary genre (“a military fable of the middle ages”), and a speech act (“a lie, a fiction”).¹⁴ Indeed, as Catherine Gallagher notes, “until the mid-eighteenth century, there was no widely employed means of distinguishing between a fiction and a lie,” and even fifty years later, when Hatfield was decried as a romancer, no one meant either that he wrote good stories or that he was an ardent lover.¹⁵ The verb “to counterfeit,” which De Quincey employs to mean “pose as,” could also, at the time he was writing, mean “deceive,” “imitate,” “represent,” or “forge,” a point that suggests the continuities among ethical, artistic, and legal regulatory mechanisms.¹⁶ Counterfeit, like delusion, can thus be used interchangeably for the *impostures* and *forgeries* that inspired this book, but the apparent clarity purchased by these two terms is itself something of a delusion. Roughly speaking, imposture has to do with persons, forgery has to do with texts. Forgery, a crime under common as well as statute law, is defined in Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* as “the fraudulent making or alteration of a writing to the prejudice of another man’s right.”¹⁷ Imposture, the assumption of a false name or false attributes, is not as such a crime; the word is now used primarily to designate behavioral abnormalities, although it borrows a quasi-legal status from its association with fraud. The noun form was often loosely applied by eighteenth-century journalists as a term of political abuse akin to “usurper”; thus a 1711 chapbook tautologically denounced the Pretender (James Stuart) as “an Impostor,” and Mahomet was dubbed “The Impostor” in a well-known drama. By the turn of the

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century, the word's political sense was bifurcated between radicals denouncing establishment impostures and Tories who cast Napoleon as both arch-impostor and arch-fiend.¹⁸ Samuel Johnson had earlier dismissed Macpherson's *Fingal* not as a forgery but as "an imposition."¹⁹ And like "romance," imposture could also mean either "egregious fiction" or "lie," as in Richard Hurd's urbane defense, in his 1762 *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, of the poet's "liberty of multiplying and enlarging his impostures at pleasure."²⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, therefore, imposture points toward problems of literary mimesis as well as social emulation, while forgery, the more obviously textual offense, only occasionally intersects with the history of literature. Most forgeries, of course, are economic transactions involving a minimum of invention. "Literary" forgeries like Psalmanazar's *Description of Formosa* began to be collected and retailed for entertainment value in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in Isaac D'Israeli's popular *Curiosities of Literature*, where stories of falsified manuscripts and faked histories are described equivalently as "forgeries" and "impostures." The distinction between imposturous performance and forged artifact is extremely fluid, and each quickly comes to seem implicated in the other. The comic actor and mimic Samuel Foote, for example, referred to his impersonations as robberies and "forgeries" of public personalities.²¹ The successful performance of an imposture may require the production of forged documents (though not all forgeries constitute imposture). Chatterton, Ireland, and Psalmanazar have passed through literary and social history as both forgers and impostors, with the relationship between the two terms rarely examined.

The partisan connotations of both terms emerge more clearly in the genealogical controversies that marked the competing versions of cultural nationalism articulated during the period between the Scottish and Irish Acts of Union (1707–1800). Macpherson's Ossianic cycle was but the most audacious of many attempts to forge a national literary culture. Katie Trumpener has shown how Scottish, Irish, and Welsh bards and antiquaries elicited charges of "imposture" for manufacturing "fabulous accounts of the origins of nations, and founders of empire."²² The same forgeries could, however, be defended by nationalist scholars as a form of "patriotic resistance to English occupation." The longstanding bardic practice of "flattering their patrons with ancient pedigrees" became politicized just as these recitations passed into written record; indeed, as Derrida remarks, "the birth of writing (in the colloquial sense) was nearly everywhere and most often linked to genealogical anxiety."²³ The

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coincidence of a cultural nationalist discourse with the erasure of functioning political boundaries emphasizes the stakes involved in fictions of ethnic autonomy. The most famous of the early eighteenth-century ballad forgeries, Lady Wardlaw (Elizabeth Halkett)'s "Hardyknute" (1719), owed its notoriety not only to a nationalist theme but to its anonymous composition by a Jacobite gentlewoman, whose apparent indifference to authorial recognition bespoke the stubborn persistence of feudal independence in the northern reaches of the empire. The discovery that "Hardyknute" did not, in fact, date from the fifteenth century and was not composed by a minstrel precipitated a genealogical crisis of extraordinary proportions, with Robert Chambers concluding in 1843 that none of "the high-class romantic ballads of Scotland are . . . ancient compositions," that they might all have been written by a woman, and that the lineage of heroic ballads like "Sir Patrick Spens" was irremediably tainted as a result.²⁴ Perhaps in compensation for this uncertain pedigree, claims of priority and imperialist appropriation also emerged in debates over the English vernacular canon. The Jacobite bishop William Lauder published his *Essay on Milton's Use and Imitations of the Moderns in "Paradise Lost"* – accusing the poet of plagiarizing Latin sources – in 1749, culminating a propaganda campaign he had launched shortly after the Young Pretender's defeat. His attack soon discredited, Lauder rebounded a few years later with charges of "imposture" in Milton's *Eikonoklastes*. Far from having accomplished "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme," Milton was instead, according to Lauder, "the first Transgressor," uplifted by his followers to a bad eminence among English poets.²⁵

The intertwined problems of paternity, alterity, mendacity, and logosophy might lead us to read Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of his "Writing Lesson" in *Tristes Tropiques* as an ur-narrative of imposture. Lévi-Strauss has been describing an exchange of gifts between himself and the Nambikawa, a tribe who, like the Ossianic Celts, "have no written language." Nevertheless he offers them sheets of paper and pencils, with which they begin "drawing wavy, horizontal lines." This activity, Lévi-Strauss understands, represents their idea of what it means to write. "The majority did this and no more," he adds,

[b]ut the chief had further ambitions. No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing. So he asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his

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own make-believe . . . and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher.

The chief, as Lévi-Strauss realizes to his chagrin, has employed his “writing” not for the purpose of “acquiring knowledge, or remembering or understanding,” but to increase “the authority and prestige of one individual – or function – at the expense of others.”²⁶

Several important themes crystallize in this anecdote. The ethnographer’s participation in the charade emphasizes “the collaborative nature of imposture,” even or especially when no conscious venality intrudes: like neuroses, impostures succeed because they *work* for more than one individual.²⁷ It will be an axiom of the following chapters, therefore, that imposture and its cognates are symptoms, in the structuralist sense, of the symbolic order they traverse. Next we can observe the curious displacement of the narrator’s moral judgment: where he might be expected to condemn the chief, instead he blames the wavy lines. Scribbles that pose as signifiers, these marks would be harmless as the indulgence of aesthetic sensibility but become culpable when they acquire exchange-value. Writing should not be, but mean. In their usurpation of use-value (meaning) by exchange (prestige), the scribbles call attention to their arbitrariness, or what post-structuralists call the materiality of the signifier. Derrida criticizes Lévi-Strauss for the “singularly narrow definition of writing” that cannot accommodate such marks, and for the untheorized notion of aesthetic interest that he opposes to writing’s proper purpose.²⁸ It may be added that the *aestheticized* signifier, a recurrent feature of imposture-narratives, evokes the psychoanalytic concept of the fetish. Finally, the chief’s deception – the display of a credential he does not actually possess – reinstates rather than blurs the cultural difference between himself and the narrator, who writes for the legitimate purposes of knowing, remembering, and understanding. Thus imposture marks a negated position in the dialectic of enlightenment, even while its most obvious form, the assumption of a false name, undermines “the myth of a transparent legibility” on which *proper* identity is grounded.²⁹ The valency of such encounters can, however, easily be reversed, as when De Quincey, confronted with a wandering Malay in his Cumberland cottage,

addressed him in some lines from the Iliad; considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek, in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one. He worshipped me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbours; for the Malay had no way of betraying the secret. (*Confessions* 56–57)