

FAKING LITERATURE

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CHAPTER I

Sampling the spurious

Certain times and places are undoubtedly more hospitable than others to the activities surveyed in this book. Britain in the 1760s must have been one such chronotope, when Thomas Percy was tampering with the texts of the ballads he was to publish as *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. That appeared a year after someone called ‘William Marshall’ translated as *The Castle of Otranto* a book allegedly written by an equally imaginary Italian, ‘Onuphrio Muralto’, and given the fictive imprint of ‘Naples, 1529’. Marketed as ‘a Gothic story’ in its second edition of 1765, it turned out to be the inaugural manifestation of a literary genre characterised by its ‘ghostings of the already spectral’ and ‘recounterfeiting of the already counterfeit’.¹ Its actual author was Horace Walpole, fourth Earl of Oxford, who transformed his Strawberry Hill residence into a pseudo-Gothic castle. In 1768 a fifteen-year-old called Thomas Chatterton began to retro-fashion himself as ‘Thomas Rowley’ in order to compose fifteenth-century poetry and other literary munitments. After Walpole had indicated that he was ‘by no means satisfied with the authenticity’ of Chatterton’s ‘supposed mss’, Chatterton accused Walpole of having himself ‘indulge[d] in such Deceit’. The real foundation of Walpole’s double standard, he alleged, was economic: those with ‘the Gifts of Wealth & Lux’ry’ could get away with literary practices for which the ‘poor & Mean’ were castigated.²

At the beginning of that decade, James Macpherson extrapolated from fragments of Gaelic poetry what he claimed to be English translations of two ‘ancient’ epics attributed to Ossian: *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763). The year 1763 was also the date of the first recorded forgery of a document concerning Shakespeare, just a few

¹ Hogle, ‘Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit’, 295.

² Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, 262, 271.

years before he was installed as England's national poet at the belated bicentenary celebrations of his birth, which David Garrick organised for the Stratford Jubilee in 1769. An invented anecdote about Shakespeare was the substance of a letter quoted in an essay about the actor Edward Alleyn and published in the *Theatrical Review*. Written allegedly in 1600 by George Peele (who died in 1596) to Christopher Marlowe (who was killed in 1593), that letter – forged by the Shakespeare scholar, George Steevens – recalled Shakespeare's annoyance at being accused by Alleyn of having plagiarised their conversations when composing the speech about acting in *Hamlet*.³ The manuscript has not survived, but its 'olde' spellings were designed for a post-neoclassical generation whose antiquarian interests were nurtured by Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), which praises Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596) as a 'Gothic' alternative to those 'Grecian' notions of literary excellence advocated by neoclassical critics.⁴ The possibility that Shakespeare was a plagiarist must have occurred a decade earlier to readers of Charlotte Lennox's *Shakespear Illustrated* (1753), which analyses 'the novels and histories on which [his] plays . . . are founded'. It is certainly taken for granted by Herbert Lawrence, whose 'historical allegory', *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* (1769), demystifies the Bard by representing his plagiarism as symptomatic of behaviour first recorded in Nicholas Rowe's *Life of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), namely his youthful activities as a deer-poacher.⁵ At this iconic moment in the formation of English literature as a source of national pride, Shakespeare is both a transcendent genius and an all-too-human plagiarist. Literary forgery is in Joseph Conrad's sense the 'secret sharer' of literature.

North of the border, James Macpherson had already produced the canonical texts for anybody interested in either committing or studying literary forgery. Like Bardolatry, they too were conscripted for a nationalist agenda. One of their aims was anti-English: to show that, since the Gaels inherited a far more ancient culture than that of the Sassenachs who had defeated them at the Battle of Culloden in 1745, demoralised Highlanders had grounds for feeling culturally superior to their conquerors. The other, however, was anti-Irish: to show that, since the ancient bard who had composed those Gaelic

³ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 241–42; Grebanier, *Great Shakespeare Forgery*, 139.

⁴ Wellek, *Rise of English Literary History*, 95–102.

⁵ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 395–96, 68.

ballads ‘collected’ by Macpherson was a Scot called Ossian rather than an Irishman called Oisean, the originating site of Gaelic culture in the third century AD was not Ireland but Scotland. Macpherson’s Ossianic *oeuvre* is as cornucopian a text for analysts of spuriousity as that other 1760s phenomenon, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, is for theorists of fiction. As part of a body of writing which ‘made use of some fourteen or fifteen Gaelic ballads’, *Fingal* is best described as ‘a “collage”’ of ‘reworked authentic material, together with a liberal admixture of pure Macpherson’.⁶ Neither wholly Ossian nor wholly Macpherson, but more Macphersonian than Ossianic, that mestizo corpus is the work of a composite figure I shall call ‘Macphossian’. Its formal innovation was to develop a generic hybridity which a subsequent generation of French Symbolist poets would know as *poèmes en prose*, but its literary strategy was to market genuine Macpherson in the guise of bogus Ossian.

Macpherson was a native speaker of Gaelic who could not read Gaelic writing, and the ambitious author of an heroic poem in six cantos called *The Highlander* (1758), which failed to attract the attention he had hoped for. In order to satisfy the curiosity of John Home – a friend who had written a successful play called *Douglas* (1756), but who knew no Gaelic – Macpherson ‘translated’ a poem on the death of Ossian’s son, Oscar, which Home showed to a group of Edinburgh literati. Among them was the inaugural professor of rhetoric and *belles lettres* at Edinburgh University, Hugh Blair, who would eventually write but not sign the preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, and allow Macpherson to rewrite the final paragraph of his also unsigned *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763).⁷ Persuaded by Macpherson that this book was the pilot study for a major research project – namely, to retrieve the ‘lost’ epic poetry of the Scottish Highlands – the Edinburgh group funded a couple of field-trips by him between August 1760 and January 1761. This enabled him to collect not only Gaelic manuscripts but also transcripts by his research assistant, Ewan Macpherson, of ballads they heard recited.⁸ By January 1761 he was telling a correspondent that he had been ‘lucky enough to lay [his] hands on a pretty complete poem, and truly epic, concerning Fingal’.⁹ Macpherson made the

⁶ Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 10; Gaskill, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson’, 129.

⁷ Chapman, ‘Blair on Ossian’, 82–83.

⁸ Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 116, 121, 123.

⁹ Thomson, ‘Macpherson’s *Ossian*’, 258.

holistic assumption that he had discovered chips off an old block which, like ancient pots from shards of pottery, could be painstakingly reassembled. By calling the Gaelic ballads ‘fragments’, he dignified them with the classicising term *fragmenta*, and treated them as parts of a dismembered tradition in need of re-membering into what the preface to *Fragments* calls ‘one Work of considerable Length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic Poem’.¹⁰ Like the scattered limbs of Osiris in the Greco-Roman tradition, the reassembled *membra disjecta* of Ossian’s ballads might be expected to engender a renaissance, this time in Scotland, just as the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had enabled an earlier renaissance called the Renaissance. Now that Gaelic was in danger of dying out as a result of the invaders’ linguicidal policy of making English the language of instruction in Scottish schools, Macpherson’s ‘translations’ could be praised as a timely attempt to save an endangered species of poetry from extinction.

The theoretical framework for such ambitions derived from contemporary understandings of epic poetry. Macpherson attended the University of Aberdeen at a time when its staff included Thomas Blackwell, the author of *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735). Blackwell observed that civil upheavals had been the seedbed of epic poetry not only in Homer’s Greece and Dante’s Italy but most recently in Milton’s England, where *Paradise Lost* (1667) had emerged from a civil war. In traditional hierarchies of literary ‘kinds’, epic was the pre-eminent genre. Politically, it celebrated the nationhood of an emergent state, and identified national security with a hegemonic family: what Virgil’s *Aeneid* had done for Augustus Caesar, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596) had been designed to do for Elizabeth Tudor, reaffirming her self-legitimizing genealogy as a descendant of King Arthur and therefore the rightful ruler of England. Scotland’s position in universal history was distinctly anomalous, since although it had experienced turmoil in abundance it appeared not to have produced a Homer. There were two ways of remedying this deficiency. One was to write the missing epic, as William Wilkie (‘the Homer of the Lowlands’) attempted to do when, taking as his model Alexander Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* (1720) into heroic couplets, he published a nine-book epic on the Fall of

¹⁰ Mossner, *Forgotten Hume*, 85.

Thebes called the *Epigoniad* (1757), whose heroes were the descendants (*epigones*) of warriors who had participated in an earlier and unsuccessful siege of that city.¹¹ The other was to discover that ‘lost’ Scottish epic which, it stood to reason, must once have existed. This was also the preferred option. Since societies of the Enlightenment could no longer believe in either the supernatural ‘machinery’ or clapped out classical mythology which featured so prominently in the defining examples of the genre, the rediscovery of a Gaelic epic would avoid the problems of inventing one. As the vehicle of northern mythologies, it would revitalise poetry in a manner anticipated by William Collins in his ‘Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, Considered as the Subject of Poetry’ (1749), which Collins had given to John Home by 1750. Ossian would emerge as the Homer of the north, his Gaelic language comparable to Homeric Greek, that vivid language of the passions out of which epic arose. After producing English versions of Ossianic poetry declared Homeric by Blair, Macpherson completed the circuit by translating *The Iliad of Homer* (1773) into ‘Ossianic’ prose-poetry.¹²

Blair admired Macphossian as poetry, although he also wanted it to be revisionist history.¹³ Macpherson claimed that the fragments he had collected were vestiges of an oral tradition going back to the third century AD, and a legacy of those indomitable Caledonians who had resisted the Roman invasion of Britain.¹⁴ The legendary chief of the Fenians (called ‘Fionn’ by the Irish) was actually ‘Fingal’ (Finn the Gael). The nationalist aim of *Temora*, as set out in the ‘Dissertation’ which precedes it, is to remove from Scottish culture the stigma of derivativeness from Ireland.¹⁵ Gaelic texts discrepant from Macpherson’s ‘translations’ were denounced as ‘spurious fifteenth-century Irish versions’ of those earlier Scottish ballads.¹⁶ From an Irish perspective, therefore, Macpherson was guilty not of forgery but of appropriation. Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) – a title designed to attract readers of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) – is in this respect a counter-Macphersonian act of reclamation, despite her ‘absolute silence on the Ossian controversy’.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid., 68–77.

¹² Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 85.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ Smart, *James Macpherson*, 102–03.

¹⁵ Haugen, ‘Ossian and the Invention of Textual History’, 312.

¹⁶ Colgan, ‘Ossian: Success or Failure?’, 346.

¹⁷ Greene, *Makers and Forgers*, 11; O’Halloran, ‘Irish Re-creations of the Gaelic Past’, 87.

In England the political potential of Macphossian as the lost epic poetry of an heroic but oppressed people could be diffused by discrediting it as a forgery. Published in Edinburgh, and in the language of the invader, Macphossian was far too politicised a text to be assessed in eighteenth-century London solely in terms of those aestheticising criteria which weighed the ‘beauties’ of a literary work against its ‘defects’ before passing judgement on it. James Boswell told David Hume that the English had been ‘exceedingly fond’ of *Fingal* until they learnt ‘that it was Scotch’, whereupon ‘they became jealous and silent’.¹⁸ Samuel Johnson thought that because the Scots ‘love *Scotland* better than truth’ and certainly ‘better than enquiry’, they would never admit to the fraudulence of anything which flattered their vanity as much as Macphossian did.¹⁹ The vehemence of such remarks leads Richard B. Scher to argue that those English men of letters who sought to discredit Macphossian – Johnson, Thomas Percy and Horace Walpole – did so because they ‘felt threatened by the sudden ascent of their Scottish counterparts’.²⁰ Their strategy certainly succeeded in England, where for the next couple of centuries Macphossian would be remembered by the arbiters of taste only as a literary forgery, and deployed in support of the Scotophobic view that ‘the Teutonic nations’ have manifested ‘immemorially’ a higher ‘respect for truth . . . than that acknowledged by the Celts’.²¹

Post-colonial readers figure Macpherson as ‘a post-Culloden Highlander’ whose retrieval of a national epic offered some consolation for the ‘cultural apocalypse of Culloden’.²² Yet this subaltern interpretation of Macphossian and its supporting ‘dissertations’ as a declaration of independence, designed to appeal to ‘all who feel themselves subjected to an alien cultural hegemony’, is qualified by the fact that Macpherson not only defended the 1707 Act of Union in his *History of Great Britain* (1775) but published in 1776 a book on *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted against the Claims of America*.²³ Moreover, Howard D. Weinbrot argues, Macphossian achieved cult status among English readers precisely because its constituent poems were so ‘unrevolutionary’ as to be ‘wholly unthreatening’ to a nation

¹⁸ Mossner, *Forgotten Hume*, 89. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁰ Scher, ‘Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson “Cheat”’, 234.

²¹ Hewlett, ‘Forged Literature’, 321.

²² Gaskill, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson’, 119; Crawford, ‘Post-Cullodenism’, 18.

²³ Gaskill, ‘Ossian in Europe’, 666.

convinced that the Jacobites had been so demoralised by Culloden that there would be no further need (as the national anthem had phrased it in 1745) 'Rebellious Scots to crush'.²⁴ The politics of Macphossian's literary production in Scotland were scaled down to a cultural politics of reception in England, where the principal hegemony it broke was the heroic couplet. The legacy of that prosodic revolution in the realm of the bogus would be seen in the prophetic books of William Blake and subsequently in *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, who ranked Macphossian in the same class as the Bible.²⁵ Anglophone admirers read Macphossian, therefore, as a thrilling departure from a late Augustan style of poetry committed, in its fondness for heroic couplets, to the rational pleasures of epigrammatic point and strongly marked closure. Macphossian, by contrast, decomposed poetry-as-product into poetry-as-process, 'hypnotically repetitive, oracular, incantatory, dreamlike'.²⁶ Its confection of antiquity, sublimity and simplicity both anticipated and helped articulate nostalgia for that mythical age when primitives lived passionately in elemental settings. At a time when nature 'methodised' was losing its allure, Macphossian's evocations of Highland wildernesses – drawn, apparently, not from Ossianic ballads but from the Badenoch landscape around Ruthven, where Macpherson grew up – created a new *frisson* for a generation in transit from a 'Gothick' horror of mountain gloom to a Romantic appreciation of mountain glory as a source of the sublime.²⁷

Most importantly, Macphossian was exportable. Against Robert Frost's subsequent dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation, Macpherson claims in his preface to *The Poems of Ossian* (1784) that any poem which resists a skilled translator must be 'counterfeit'. The favourable reception accorded translations of Macphossian into numerous European languages substantiated his view that the provenance of poetry is less important than responses to it. By presenting himself as a translator whose skills enabled him to 'equal his original' – and how could it have been otherwise, seeing that most of his 'translations' *were* the originals? – Macpherson acknowl-

²⁴ Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue*, 555; David Nichol Smith (ed.), *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, 302.

²⁵ Carpenter, 'Vogue of Ossian in America', 413–14.

²⁶ Frye, 'Defining an Age of Sensibility', 148.

²⁷ Thomson, *Gaelic Sources*, 84.

edged publicly his talents as a translator and privately his genius as a poet.²⁸

As a ‘translator’ who was simultaneously an editor and author of Ossianic poetry, Macpherson was caught between rival modes of textual transmission, one oral, the other chirographic and more recently print-specific. The oral tradition sanctioned changes to traditional tales for the reason given by W.H. Auden in his elegy on W.B. Yeats, namely that ‘the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living’.²⁹ But in the dominant print-culture of the eighteenth century, which was the first to aspire to a ‘correct’ text of Shakespeare’s plays, only one form of the words could be authentic. Macpherson’s English ‘translations’ of both Gaelic manuscripts and transcripts of oral performances were at varying removes, however, from their putative originals. Some, like the 1512 *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, had been preserved in manuscripts which Macpherson was unable to read on account of their bardic language and old Irish handwriting.³⁰ Was Macphossian based on words read or words heard? When pointing out in 1765 that the Gaelic materials which underpin *Fingal* had been ‘collected from tradition, and some manuscripts’, Macpherson seemed to be saying that the Gaelic originals had been more frequently oral than textual. To represent Ossianic materials as the oral residue of an oral culture was a strong position to be in, since critics like Johnson assumed that Macphossian was based on manuscripts that either did not exist or would not support Macpherson’s translations of them.³¹ Macpherson therefore gave ammunition to his enemies when he abandoned the oral-provenance argument and proceeded to translate his ‘translations’ into synthetic Gaelic.³² In 1763 he published the Gaelic ‘original’ of the seventh book of *Temora*, perhaps put together by his cousin, Lachlan Macpherson, but in any case ‘back-translated’ from Macphossian English.³³ The completion of what Thomson calls ‘re-fabricated Gaelic versions’ of the whole of Macphossian – the translation of it *into* its ‘originals’ – was a major task still in process when Macpherson died in 1796. Finished eventually by friends, *The Poems of Ossian, in the*

²⁸ Folkenflik, ‘Macpherson, Chatterton, Blake’, 388.

²⁹ Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems*, 141.

³⁰ Thomson, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson and the Gaelic World’, 12.

³¹ Gaskill, ‘Ossian in Europe’, 645.

³² Thomson, ‘Macpherson’s *Ossian*’, 256.

³³ Thomson, ‘“Ossian” Macpherson and the Gaelic World’, 13; Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, 13.

Original Gaelic was published in 1807 and accompanied by ‘a Literal Translation into Latin’. Far from solving the problem of origins, it merely complicated the textuality of the text by rendering it polyglot.

Macphossian remains the key text for analysts of literary forgery because it generated two quite different phenomena: an ‘Ossianic controversy’ about the authenticity of the Gaelic materials mediated by Macpherson’s ‘translation’, and an enormous cult readership which felt free to ignore that controversy because it knew what it liked. Macphossian was translated into a dozen languages: Bohemian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Swedish and Spanish. The results of that diaspora are traced in such studies as Rudolf Tambo’s *Ossian in Germany* (1901), Paul van Tieghem’s *Ossian en France* (1917) and Isidoro Montiel’s *Ossián en España* (1974).³⁴ Different countries had different uses for what they imported: for whereas Michael Denis translated Macphossian into German in order to add Ossian to the canon of great writers, Cesarotti’s Italian translation was to be ammunition for anti-classicists.³⁵ By 1805, when the Highland Society of Scotland finally published its *Report* on ‘the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian’, and concluded that Macpherson had merely tampered excessively with genuinely Ossianic poetry, Macphossian was selling better than anything except the Bible and Shakespeare.³⁶ Critics who assumed that Macphossian could be destroyed by exposing it as a forgery had no influence on a popular readership determined not to let problems of provenance spoil its pleasure in the text. Those who think they are performing a public service by establishing that a popular book is spurious cannot rely on public approval, as is evident from widespread indifference to the revelation in 1999 that the author of *How Green Was My Valley* (1939) was not a Welsh miner’s son, Richard Llewellyn, but a Londoner called Vivian Lloyd. What Umberto Eco (recalling Gilles Deleuze) calls ‘the force of falsity’ makes inaccurate ideas influential, transforms imperfect understandings into creative misprisions and enables fake texts to generate genuine experiences.³⁷ Mendelssohn-lovers who thrill to the sounds of ‘Fingal’s Cave’ in the *Hebrides* Overture are unlikely to care that it can be sourced ultimately to Macphossian, and was inspired partly

³⁴ Haugen, ‘Ossian and the Invention of Textual History’, 310.

³⁵ Gaskill, ‘Ossian in Europe’, 653.

³⁶ Smart, *James Macpherson*, 164; Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 171; Mackenzie (ed.), *Report*, *passim*.

³⁷ Eco, *Serendipities*, 1–21; Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 126–55.

by Mendelssohn's visit in 1829 to the basalt rock formation 'discovered' in 1772 by Joseph Banks on the isle of Staffa off the west coast of Scotland, and identified subsequently as a suitable location to associate for touristic purposes with the hero of *Fingal*.³⁸

Macpherson overcame the disappointments of modern authorship provoked by indifference to *The Highlander* (1758) by deciding to become a great ancient poet. This involved foregoing the facile pleasures of fame for the more arcane delights of deception. He did so in the knowledge that he had nothing to lose if he failed (since any 'faults' could be attributed to those Ossianic ballads he had faithfully translated) and everything to gain should he succeed. Publicly, he was merely the talented facilitator of another poet's work; but privately, as the author of Macphossian rather than the translator of Ossian, he could bask in the praise it attracted. Writing as James Macpherson, he would never have been acclaimed as an 'original genius', a phenomenon much discussed after the publication of William Sharpe's *Dissertation upon Genius* (1755). Unlike Macphossian, Macpherson would never have joined that elite group of writers described in William Duff's *Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* (1770), whose other members are Homer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Ariosto and Tasso. Nor would Hugh Blair have considered Macpherson – as he did Macphossian – the equal of Homer.³⁹ In such circumstances, the transient satisfaction of showing (by confessing to a forgery) that some of the arbiters of taste at that time were ignorant fools was as nothing compared with the durable delights of knowing that his writings were treated as works of genius. For like Sir Edmund Backhouse, who forged the diary of a Chinese courtier and invented the diaries of a Grand Eunuch in order to authenticate that 'pornographic novelette' he called his 'memoirs' – thus prompting Hugh Trevor-Roper to describe him as 'the T.J. Wise of Chinese manuscripts, the Baron Corvo of Peking' – Macpherson would have relished 'the exquisite private satisfaction of deceiving the elect'.⁴⁰ Attacks on his integrity as a translator were unintentional tributes to his excellence as a writer. After Duff had declared Macphossian to be a work of genius, how delightful it must have been to read some five years later Johnson's intended rebuke that those poems 'never

³⁸ Buruma, *Voltaire's Coconuts*, 76, 78.

³⁹ Folkenflik, 'Macpherson, Chatterton, Blake', 384–85.

⁴⁰ Trevor-Roper, *Hidden Life*, 334, 335, 369, 350.

existed in any other form than that which we have seen'.⁴¹ By the time Macphossian was generally regarded as some sort of forgery, Macpherson had the pleasure of finding himself described as the 'Homer of the Celtic tongue' in an anthology of *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1786) edited by another creative refurbisher of antiquities, John Pinkerton.⁴²

The Macphossian affair is a richly foundational episode in the annals of modern spuriousity. Its mixture of Ossianic residues with Macphossianic embellishments results in a textual hybridity which destabilises the commonsense notion that a literary text is either genuine or bogus. For as Macpherson notes in his preface to *Temora*, Macphossian was both inauthentic to English critics (who demanded to see the manuscripts) and authentic to Irish critics convinced that Macpherson had hijacked their own cultural property.⁴³ The conflictual reception of Macphossian indicates that a literary forgery reveals more about the times it is produced in than about the past it pretends to be part of. By concealing its actual origins and then inventing a factitious source for itself after the event, Macphossian plays havoc with the unidirectional theory of time that underpins diachronic forms of literary scholarship such as *Quellenforschung*, which regards the sources (*Quellen*) of a text as always antecedent to it. But as Borges suggests, 'every writer *creates* his own precursors': anybody who has read Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) will detect Kafkaesque elements in Charles Dickens' description of the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* (1857).⁴⁴ The supersession of Ossian by Macphossian prefigures the postmodern displacement of the real by the simulacrum. The problems posed by Macphossian's historical revisionism is a salutary reminder that literary texts which contain 'history' may not be history. Macpherson's imputation to Ossian of the authorship of Macphossian draws attention to the power of the signature in the creation of textual authority. And the phenomenal success of Macphossian reveals not only the difficulty of establishing authenticity as a criterion of value, but also its unimportance once literary studies redirect attention from the inscrutable origins of a text to the critical history of its reception, and the various uses made of it by those different readerships that constitute its afterlife. In

⁴¹ Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 2.

⁴² Haywood, *Making of History*, 117.

⁴³ Groom, *Making of Percy's Reliques*, 89–90.

⁴⁴ Borges, *Labyrinths*, 236.

short, Macphossian seriously challenges the commonsense assumption that ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ are polar opposites of the fake. Macphossian is an original and authentic fake.

Ballads transmitted in English posed comparable problems in the eighteenth century. The story of how, in 1753, a young Shropshire clergyman called Thomas Percy prevented Humphrey Pitt’s maid-servants from continuing to light fires with sheets from a mid-seventeenth-century manuscript collection of ballads (‘lying dirty on the floor’) is one of the romances of modern scholarship.⁴⁵ Encouraged by Johnson to publish his find, Percy selected about a quarter of the texts from what would come to be known as the Percy Folio, and then – compliant with contemporary proprieties – set about making them presentable to readers who thought themselves more refined than the societies that had produced those ballads. By allowing no one to inspect ‘his’ Folio, Percy avoided the problems Macpherson encountered after publishing a Gaelic specimen in *Temora* (1763).⁴⁶ Percy produced an eighteenth-century simulacrum of what his contemporaries considered to be ‘ancient’ English poems. He did so by not only ‘perfecting’ them (that is, correcting their ‘errors’ of style and taste) but also ‘restoring’ them – rather in the way that ancient sculptures had had their missing limbs prostheticised in Renaissance workshops – by textual additions of varying length, all written in what he took to be the spirit of the originals. Whereas some of the ballads Percy ‘improved’ were given only a few extra stanzas, others ‘were altered beyond all recognition’, and emerged with ‘scarcely one incident or even one line that might be found in the manuscript version’.⁴⁷ Consequently, Percy augmented the thirty-nine lines which comprise the manuscript version of ‘Childe of Elle’ into a two-hundred line ‘Ballad of the Childe of Elle’.⁴⁸

Thirty years after publishing his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Percy conceded the impossibility of trying to please two different kinds of reader. One was ‘the judicious Antiquary’ – the kind of person Joseph Ritson turned himself into – who thought that the business of any modern editor of ‘strange old stuff’ is to reproduce it in a diplomatic text, that is, to print warts-and-all copies

⁴⁵ Bertram H. Davis, *Thomas Percy*, 24.

⁴⁶ Groom, *Making of Percy’s Reliques*, 102.

⁴⁷ Walter Jackson Bate, ‘Percy’s Use of His Folio’, 338.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 345–46.

of the manuscripts, no matter how crude they might appear in spelling, versification or sentiment. The rest were those ‘Reader[s] of Taste’ who liked to have their exquisite sensibilities caressed by the elegantly melting cadences of Macphossian.⁴⁹ By sharing Percy’s preference ‘to see these old things in a modern dress [rather] than *in puris naturalibus*’, they ensured that the *Reliques* were favourably received in the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ But in his *Select Collection of English Songs* (1784), Ritson treats Percy’s texts as little more than forgeries of the originals.⁵¹ And so in 1794, when Percy was finally goaded into reprinting verbatim the manuscript copy of ‘The Marriage of Sir Gawaine’, he did so only to show ‘how unfit for publication many of the pieces would have been if’, instead of ‘correct[ing] and amend[ing] them’, he had ‘superstitiously retained’ all of the ‘blunders, corruptions, and nonsense of illiterate Reciters and Transcribers’.⁵² That argument did not impress the Victorian editors of the Percy Folio, John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, who describe Percy’s editorial treatment of the ‘Heir of Linne’ as ‘sartorial-fartorial’.⁵³

Percy’s attempt to mediate a text for different readers with incommensurable expectations resulted in the first of many ‘scandals of the ballad’, as Susan Stewart calls them.⁵⁴ Decorousness was an early casualty of the developing taste for ‘authenticity’. Allan Cunningham, who faked the materials collected in Robert Cromek’s *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810), thought ‘occasional coarseness’ necessary if such fabrications were to read like ‘fair specimens of the ancient song and ballad’.⁵⁵ It was difficult to discern balladry’s equivalent of the distinction between antique furniture and the ‘fauxniture’ described in Herbert Cescinsky’s *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture* (1931). Dense webs of mediation separated modern readers of printed texts from those oral cultures in which ballads were not written and read but sung and heard, and ballad-faking is one of the easier forms of textual factitiousness to master. Symptomatic of such problems is the status of what Sigurd Hustvedt calls ‘the *Hardyknute* hoax’ as ‘a touchstone in ballad criticism’

⁴⁹ Johnston, *Enchanted Ground*, 81–82.

⁵⁰ Bronson, *Joseph Ritson*, vol. II, 605.

⁵¹ Percy, *Reliques*, intro. Groom, vol. I, 53.

⁵² Bate, ‘Percy’s Use of His Folio’, 342.

⁵³ Bronson, *Joseph Ritson*, vol. II, 564.

⁵⁴ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 102–31.

⁵⁵ Farrer, *Literary Forgeries*, 263.

throughout the eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Published in Edinburgh in 1719 as *Hardyknute: A Fragment of an Ancient Scots Poem*, this ballad about ‘a Scottish warrior with a Danish name’ had been written in contemporary Scots antiqued with old spellings and a few archaic words. Its author, Percy established, was Elizabeth Halkett, Lady Wardlow, one of whose brothers-in-law, Sir John Hope Bruce, circulated it with the provenance myth of its survival as ‘a much defaced vellum’ found ‘in a vault at Dunfermline’.⁵⁷ The text of *Hardyknute* reprinted in Allan Ramsay’s *The Ever Green* (1724) – a ‘Collection of Scots Poems, wrote by the Ingenious before 1600’ – had a formative and enduring influence on Sir Walter Scott, who describes it as ‘the first poem I ever learnt, the last I shall ever forget’.⁵⁸ *Hardyknute* was praised not only by Thomas Warton (as ‘a noble old Scottish poem’) but also by Thomas Gray, whose judgement that it had been ‘retouched in places by some modern hand’ did not prevent him from continuing to admire it.⁵⁹ Percy, who thought it a ‘beautiful poem’, was sent by John Pinkerton in 1778 what purported to be the longer second part of *Hardyknute*; and although he thought it ‘hardly equal to the first’, he offered to publish it in a subsequent edition of his *Reliques*.⁶⁰ Pinkerton included it in his own edition of *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781), much to the annoyance of Ritson, who in November 1784 informed readers of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* that the first part of *Hardyknute* was ‘certainly spurious’, and that Pinkerton was a literary forger like Macpherson.⁶¹ In his edition of *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1786), Pinkerton confessed that he had composed the second part of *Hardyknute* in 1776 ‘to give pleasure to the public’.⁶² All it gave Ritson, however, when introducing his own edition of *Scottish Song* (1794), was further evidence of Pinkerton’s ‘palpable and bungling forgery’.⁶³

Among the most attentive readers of Macphossian was Thomas Chatterton, who was to write seven Ossianic prose poems and parody ‘the high-sounding Ossian’ in ‘Memoirs of a Sad Dog’.⁶⁴ But whereas Macpherson was harassed for failing to produce Gaelic manuscripts of Ossianic material, Chatterton got into more trouble by fabricating the material texts supposedly written in the fifteenth

⁵⁶ Hustvedt, *Ballad Criticism*, 154, 87.

⁵⁷ Masson, *Edinburgh Sketches*, 117, 118, 110.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

⁵⁹ Hustvedt, *Ballad Criticism*, 142, 150.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185, 192.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 252–53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Chatterton’s Art*, 273–74; Doody, *Daring Muse*, 229.

century by his imaginary 'Thomas Rowley'. This involved archaising words by writing 'painting' as 'peyncteynge', 'hermits' as 'errm-mietts', and (in a self-reflexive gesture) 'ancient' as 'auntiaunt'.⁶⁵ Although Chatterton 'thickened' his diction with redundancies in the course of progressing from his 'Bristowe Tragedie' to 'An Excelente Balade of Charitie', antiquarian tastes demanded even hoarier spellings, which George Catcott furnished when preparing transcripts of Chatterton's poems for eighteenth-century collectors.⁶⁶ Such extravagance was imitated with *brio* by a subsequent admirer of stretch-limo spellings, William-Henry Ireland, whose masterpiece in this *Entfremdung* of diction was 'perrepennedycularelye'.⁶⁷ Chatterton would also Chaucerise a word by adding a terminal 'e', thus prompting Charles Lamb (parodying Pope on the Restoration poets) to assign Chatterton to that 'mob of gentlemen who wrote with "e's"'.⁶⁸ Manuscripts containing such 'worrrdes' had to be aged artificially by processes comparable to what is known in the *faux*ni-ture business as 'distressing', which involves 'falsify[ing] the chronology of an artefact by fictitious ageing'.⁶⁹ Successfully distressed furniture displays features comparable to what the passage of time does naturally when it produces craquelure in oil paintings, *sbulletare* on terracotta garden pots, and the *nobilis aerugo* of patina on bronze.⁷⁰ Susan Stewart was the first to apply the word metaphorically to 'the phenomenon of the "new antique"', an oxymoron refurbished in Coleridge's admiration for Chatterton's 'young-eyed Poesy / All deftly mask'd as hoar antiquity'.⁷¹ Strictly speaking, Stewart's term is anachronistic, since neither the 'Distrest Lovers' in the subtitle of Lewis Theobald's pseudo-Shakespearean play, *The Double Falsehood* (1728), nor the 'Distressed Poet' depicted in a 1782 engraving of Chatterton is distressed in the *faux*nishings sense. Nevertheless, it usefully labels the literary products of that fashionable nostalgia which Raphael Samuel calls 'retrochic'.⁷² In the eighteenth century an expensive way of indulging such tastes was to

⁶⁵ Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, 166, 175; Taylor, *Chatterton's Art*, 54.

⁶⁶ Chatterton, *Complete Works*, ed. Taylor and Hoover, vol. 1, xxviii; Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, 173.

⁶⁷ Sergeant, *Liars and Fakers*, 255.

⁶⁸ Aldington, *Frauds*, 221.

⁶⁹ De Plaen, 'Authenticity', 127.

⁷⁰ Nobili, *Gentle Art of Faking*, 186, 51.

⁷¹ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 67; Meyerstein, *Life of Chatterton*, 503.

⁷² Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 83–118.

erect on one's own estate a picturesque ruin of a building that never existed; illustrated in Batty Langley's *New Principles of Gardening* (1728), they enabled wealthy people to experience pleasurable melancholy from gazing on material evidence of the vicissitude of things.⁷³ To Stewart, Chatterton's 'Rowley' poems, Macphossian and the ballad 'revival' are all examples of 'distressed genres', the formula for which is 'a counterfeit materiality and an authentic nostalgia'.⁷⁴ Distressing is the most difficult deception to get away with, especially if one's resources are merely domestic. Chatterton 'antiquated' his manuscripts (as he put it) by means of 'ochre, candle-flame, glue, varnish, or plain floor-dirt'; even Alexander Howland ('Antique') Smith, who displayed extraordinary calligraphic skills when faking manuscripts by Robert Burns, squandered the advantages gained from using historically authentic paper by staining it with 'weak tea, coffee or tobacco juice'.⁷⁵

At the beginning of the century in which these prodigies of perversity appeared there was published a *Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704), written originally in Latin by an armchair 'travel liar' who 'pretended not just to have *been* there, but to *come* from there', and thus spoke with the authority of a native informant about Formosan infanticide and cannibalism.⁷⁶ Its author, who never revealed his actual patronymic, renamed himself after that Assyrian king who 'came down like the wolf on the fold' in Byron's anapaestic evocation of 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' (1815). Spelled 'Salmanazar' in the Vulgate (2 Kings, 17.3) but 'Shalmaneser' in the 1611 Bible, it became 'Psalmanaazaar' when attached to the *Description of Formosa* before being downsized to 'Psalmanazar' in the *Memoirs* (1764). A Catholic who posed as a pagan before being converted to Protestantism and mistaken for Jewish, Psalmanazar was a Frenchman who masqueraded as Irish in Italy and Japanese in Germany before arriving in England as Formosan. And this was the man whose life, Johnson declared, was 'uniform'.⁷⁷ In the second edition of his *Description of Formosa* (1705), and in answer to critics who accused him of having made it up, Psalmanazar observed (with the

⁷³ Baridon, 'Ruins as Mental Construct', 86; Zucker, 'Ruins', 124–25.

⁷⁴ Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 91.

⁷⁵ Browning, 'Essay on Chatterton', 169; Holmes, 'Chatterton: Case Re-Opened', 220; Benjamin, *Autographs*, 99.

⁷⁶ Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars*; Stagl, *History of Curiosity*, 200.

⁷⁷ Lee, 'Psalmanazar', 442.

overweening humility later exhibited by Macpherson) that only ‘a Man of prodigious parts’ could ‘invent the Description of a Country, contrive a Religion, frame Laws and Customs, make a Language, and Letters’ wholly different from those in ‘other parts of the World’.⁷⁸ An anonymous *Enquiry into the Objections against George Psalmanaazaar of Formosa* (1710) found him to be ‘the Man he pretends to be’ and the author of a ‘true’ history of that island. Some think it was ‘inspired’ by Psalmanazar, others that he himself wrote it; either way, by the following year he had lost all credibility when the *Spectator* nominated him for the role of Thyestes eating his own children in an opera called *The Cruelty of Atreus*, to be staged on All Fools’ Day.⁷⁹ His complete retraction was reserved, however, for his *Memoirs* (1764), where he denounces his *Description* as a ‘fictitious’ or ‘fabulous’ account, ‘hatched in [his] own brain, without regard to truth and honesty’, and a ‘scandalous imposition on the public’.⁸⁰

Psalmanazar’s faith in fakes was still being sustained at the end of the century, when Samuel Ireland published on 24 December 1795 his expensive folio of *Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments under the Hand and Seal of William Shakespeare*. Based on manuscripts allegedly discovered but in fact written by his son, William-Henry Ireland, it included a fragment of *Hamlette* and a holograph of *The Tragedye of Kynge Leare* unblemished by those crudities and ribaldries which mar the surviving texts of that play. Twenty-one at the time, Ireland *filis* – an admirer of Chatterton, who was dead at seventeen – readjusted the date of his birth in order to appear an even more precocious nineteen-year-old, slightly younger than Psalmanazar (who claimed to be ‘scarce twenty’ when writing his *Description of Formosa*) and much younger than Macpherson, who published *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* at the age of twenty-three.⁸¹ From these eighteenth-century exemplars we derive our association of textual delinquency with youthfulness, although the term ‘juvenile delinquency’ is not recorded until 1816, when Byron expatriated himself to Italy and mislaid the notebook in which a dozen poems he never wrote would be forged in the 1840s by Major Byron. But before concluding wistfully that fakedom is no country for old men, we should

⁷⁸ Needham, *Exemplars*, 102.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 87; Lee, ‘Psalmanazar’, 441; Foley, *Great Formosan Impostor*, 43; Stagl, *History of Curiosity*, 185.

⁸⁰ Psalmanazar, *Memoirs*, 5, 8, 6, 8.

⁸¹ Sergeant, *Liers and Fakers*, 228.

remember that Daniel L. James was in his seventies when he became 'Danny Santiago' and wrote a prize-winning novel about Latino life in Los Angeles called *Famous All Over Town* (1983) – a title reminiscent, incidentally, of James Payn's fictional treatment of the Ireland affair in *Talk of the Town* (1885).

Miscellaneous Papers prompted the Shakespeare scholar, Edmond Malone, to begin *An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments*, which he published as a 424-page volume on 1 April 1796.⁸² The timing of Malone's attack was most unfortunate for the young author of a hitherto unknown 'historical tragedy' by Shakespeare called *Vortigern*. Contracted by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, its première was to have preceded in December 1795 the publication of *Miscellaneous Papers*. Instead, it was delayed until 2 April 1796, the day after the publication of Malone's *Inquiry*. The principal actor in *Vortigern*, John Philip Kemble, was the best Shakespearean performer at that time, but a Malonean who wanted the play staged on All Fools' Day.⁸³ His 'sepulchral' delivery of the phrase, 'this solemn mock'ry', persuaded spectators that it was an apt description of the play itself, whereupon they uttered a 'discordant howl' that went on for ten minutes.⁸⁴ Kemble responded to this fiasco by substituting for *Vortigern* an unscheduled revival of Sheridan's comedy, *The School for Scandal* (1777).

The common assumption that *Vortigern* was demolished by Malone's *Inquiry* is not borne out by the text, whose target is not Ireland's play but 'the *farrago* of papers and deeds' exhibited in *Miscellaneous Papers*, which Malone systematically discredits on such historical and philological grounds as their Chattertonian spellings.⁸⁵ But in spite of concluding that the manuscript of *Vortigern* was a fake, Malone was so taken with the play as to attend its opening night inconspicuously.⁸⁶ Had *Vortigern* not been offered in 'the *pretended* handwriting of Shakespeare', he reasons, it might have passed for 'a genuine old play' by someone other than Shakespeare.⁸⁷ Although *Vortigern* 'can be no other than a modern fiction', he concludes, the question of 'whether it is a good or a bad fiction' he will 'leave to others to

⁸² Kahan, *Reforging Shakespeare*, 191.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 191, 43, 169.

⁸⁴ Mair, *Fourth Forger*, 183–84; Grebanier, *Great Shakespeare Forger*, 223–25.

⁸⁵ Malone, *Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Papers*, 304, 322.

⁸⁶ P. Martin, *Edmond Malone*, 198.

⁸⁷ Malone, *Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Papers*, 314.

determine'.⁸⁸ The most surprising aspect of his *Inquiry*, therefore, is Malone's fascination with a 'Shakespeare' play he knew to be a modern fake. The Chatterton case had aroused in him a similar ambivalence. When objecting in 1782 to the 'Rowleiomania' provoked by Chatterton's attribution of his own 'modern-antique compositions' to a 'fictitious ancient', Malone distinguished those 'spurious productions' from their 'astonishing' author, a teenager who had managed 'to compose, in about eighteen months, three thousand seven hundred verses, on various subjects', and thereby proved himself to be 'the greatest genius that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare'.⁸⁹ In that romance of authorship which, towards the end of his *Inquiry*, he weaves around those papers whose factitiousness he has just devoted three hundred pages to exposing, Malone imagines them to have been a joint production. One of the 'artificers of this clumsy and daring fraud' was perhaps an attorney's clerk familiar with legal language and able to counterfeit old handwriting; but the other may well have been a woman, 'for we know not even the sex of the author'.⁹⁰ That possibility was to become a certainty for the author of *The Shakspeare Fabrications* (1859), C. Mansfield Ingleby, who declares that 'the elder daughter of Samuel Ireland' wrote *Vortigern* with help from her younger sister.⁹¹ Whoever s/he was, Malone thought that the author was indubitably a poet. This extraordinary fantasia from a Shakespearean scholar who approached the Ireland papers in the manner of a prosecuting counsel indicates that a text whose provenance is demonstrably spurious can retain its allure by displaying those features that even hostile readers will recognise as literary.

Imperfect recollections of some of these scandals were stirred in 1987, when a British feminist press published a collection of short stories by an Asian woman of colour called Rahila Khan. Entitled *Down the Road, Worlds Away*, it appeared in the Virago Press series for teenagers called 'Upstarts'. Set in Britain's urbanised Midlands, several stories concern difficulties experienced by the daughters of Asian immigrants in negotiating cultural differences between life at home and what goes on in those inner-city schools they are obliged

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁸⁹ Malone, *Cursory Observations on Rowley*, 1, 22, 27, 13, 50, 41.

⁹⁰ Malone, *Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Papers*, 335, 330.

⁹¹ Ingleby, *Shakspeare Fabrications*, 100-01.

to attend, which may well be located just ‘down the road’ from where they live but are in other respects ‘worlds away’ from the domestic ethos provided by their Muslim parents. Three weeks after publishing the book, however, Virago Press learned that its author was a white Englishman called Toby Forward. Currently a parish priest in Brighton, he had been a schoolteacher in both Derby and Peterborough. Unable to find anything ‘in fiction to help white and Asian kids understand each other’s beliefs, pressures and conflicts’, he had decided to fill the gap himself, but to publish his fiction under a pseudonym because he believed that priests are regarded as ‘sit-com characters’ and not taken seriously.⁹²

For several days this episode provoked much anti-feminist hilarity in the media about the vicar and Virago. Its passage from public memory was eased by an embarrassed and angry Virago Press, which increased the scarcity value of Forward’s book by withdrawing it. Marking a precarious moment in the segueing of race into British gender politics in the 1980s, this incident shows how literary forgery can double as cultural critique, irrespectively of authorial intentions. Only seven of the twelve stories in *Down the Road, Worlds Away* are about young Asian females; the rest concern male-bonded young white men. Because only one of the female-centred stories (‘Daughters of the Prophet’) is written in the first person, the earliest readers of ‘Rahila Khan’ thought she had wasted narrative opportunities to enunciate an Asian-female point of view. According to Forward, both Virago Press and The Women’s Press were puzzled by her pronominal reticence, and would have preferred something more direct. But whereas The Women’s Press wanted ‘Winter Wind’ rewritten in the first person before they would anthologise it, Virago Press was more circumspect in dealing with what they took to be cultural alterity. They asked ‘Rahila Khan’ whether her ‘sense of “otherness” was still so great’ that she found it impossible ‘to write in the first person’.⁹³ Forward felt she was being manoeuvred into supplying a commodity for which feminist publishers were convinced there was a market. BBC Radio 4, which eventually broadcast the story called ‘Pictures’, told ‘Rahila Khan’ early in 1985 ‘that they wanted things “with a genuine ‘ethnic’ background” because they didn’t get many’.⁹⁴ Their conviction that such texts must be out there somewhere was fortified by recent developments in feminist theory. For by

⁹² Nettell, ‘Sex Scandal’, 1250.

⁹³ Forward, ‘Diary’, 21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*