

Daniel Cook, *Thomas Chatterton and Neglected Genius, 1760-1830*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xv + 259. £55. ISBN 9781137332486.

Thomas Chatterton was a protean poet and a mercurial figure. Before his untimely death he produced poetry and prose (as well as illustrations, genealogies, and artfully aged manuscripts) in a bewildering range of styles and genres. His ensuing posthumous canonization was a complex affair. In the immediate years after his death his legacy was dominated by issues of authenticity: were the works he purported to have discovered really the literary remains of Thomas Rowley, a hitherto unknown fifteenth-century Bristolian monk, and his circle; or were they audacious and eminently plausible forgeries concocted by a teenager educated at a provincial charity school and apprenticed as a legal scrivener?

In this elegantly scrupulous study, Daniel Cook presents the spectrum of self-fashioning and range of posthumous reinventions experienced by the respective figures of Rowley and Chatterton, explaining how they were inflected by the intellectual and cultural fashions of the period: genius theory, antiquarianism, connoisseurship, the cult of sensibility, and emergent Romanticism. In particular, Cook studies 'the figuration and occlusion of Chatterton as an author within the production and reception of his works' (7) and his eventual recuperation, after being marginalized in his own afterlife by the monk Thomas Rowley, as the exemplary neglected genius of Romanticism. Cook's contribution to eighteenth-century and Romantic studies is to show how Chatterton's problematic status as an author figure is in fact a striking reflection of rapidly changing and competing attitudes towards literature, criticism, the English past, the vernacular canon, and, crucially, the construction of unified authorship.

The account begins with a pithy history of the eighteenth-century concept of genius; Joseph Addison's Whiggish definition tied, via Richard Hurd, to medieval Gothicism. Contemporaries clamoured to describe Chatterton as a genius – properly a Shakespearean genius for his rejection of artistic rules and conventions – but at the same time these developing models disputed juvenile genius. Genius required maturity: like Whig history it embodied the progress of character. Thus Thomas Rowley, the sagacious and prolific monk, was, by this definition, more clearly the literary genius and so eclipsed Chatterton as an author figure. But focusing on Rowley introduced antiquarian attitudes that bedevilled the reception of the work in the first dozen years after Chatterton's death. Moreover, Cook is careful to indicate that there were no simple binaries between antiquarianism and history, and notes that literary antiquarians such as Edmond Malone did not hesitate to introduce questions of taste to the textual and, especially in his case, legal arguments surrounding authenticity.

What emerged was an unstable hybrid, with Chatterton appearing to embody, in the term used at the time, a 'new-old' aesthetic (33). This unresolved ambivalence informs Cook's excellent chapter on Thomas Tyrwhitt's edition of the *Rowley Poems* (1777). Cook argues that 'not only does Tyrwhitt's intervention dictate the terms of how Chatterton could be judged but also that it plays out broader disciplinary tensions inherent in contemporary literary editing' (37). Cook corrects the myth perpetrated in an off-hand and inaccurate remark made by John Nichols that Tyrwhitt performed a *volte-face* on issue of authenticity during the first printing of the edition by examining a cancellandum that demonstrates that Tyrwhitt deliberately cultivated a strategy of scholarly disinterestedness on the question of authenticity – which in any case had really already been resolved. Tyrwhitt's edition is also noteworthy for his revisions and interventions. Tyrwhitt's earlier Chaucerian scholarship had led him to propose that terminal 'e's were voiced in Middle English, so consequently he

tended to remove any unnecessary or problematic letters; he also confined his edition to poetry and included none of Rowley's voluminous, contextualizing prose.

In contrast, John Broughton's follow-up volume of Chattertoniana, *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* (1778), responded to Tyrwhitt's categorization of Rowley as a literary curiosity by presenting Chatterton as commanding a wide range of styles – making him, as he put it, 'the literary phenomenon of the times' (71). Cook, while rightly judging this to be a 'scrapbook approach' (71) that risked turning Chatterton into a hack, does discern a structure to *Miscellanies* that attempted to unify Chatterton's authorship and to showcase his varied outputs, most notably in technically proficient Patriot poetry, Churchillian satire, and primitivism. Interest in the author figure Thomas Rowley was already in decline, and *Miscellanies* gave momentum to an increasingly biographical treatment of the other Thomas: Chatterton. To connoisseurs such as Horace Walpole, already embroiled in the controversy, it appeared that 'Chatterton was becoming a legitimate author by the logic of a contemporary marketplace that favoured anomalous talents as a means by which to solidify a normative English canon' (90). After *Miscellanies*, Chatterton could no longer be dismissed as a mere forger.

For Cook, then, authenticity was a side-effect of the institutional discourses that governed the public domain, and he succeeds in shifting attention from the bewildering issues of 'fakelit' by charting the ebbs and flows of the authorial figures Rowley/Chatterton within later sentimental and Romantic constructions of authorship. Central here is John Keats's description of Chatterton's language as 'the purest english', which Cook usefully glosses as essentially 'counterfactual' (194). The posterity of his verse ensured that 'his texts became reliquaries' (201).

Daniel Cook has diligently examined the periodical press of the later eighteenth century and spins a sophisticated narrative out of its tangled web of opinions. This confident and eloquent book will be welcomed by those researching authorship, the history of editing, and the Romantic reception of earlier writers, while remaining at its heart a signal contribution to the study of Thomas Chatterton.

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