BOOK REVIEW

Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery, by Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell (London: Yale University Press, 2015). 488 pp. Hardcover, $50.

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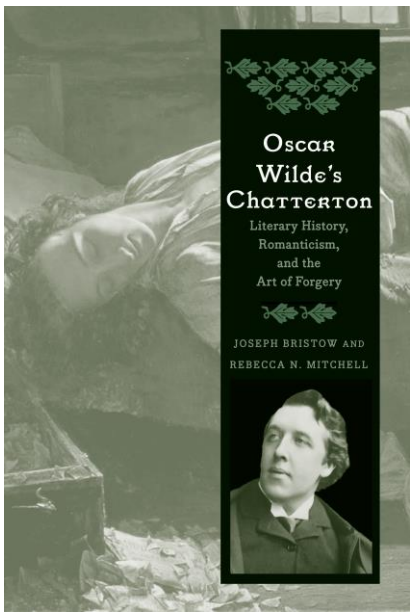

'[T]he forged object is one example of a true inventiveness that is both artful and aesthetic' (p. 298) – this, among many other complex and compelling deductions, frames Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell's investigation of the impact of Romantic-poet Thomas Chatterton on Oscar Wilde and late-Victorian aestheticism. This pivotal study – emerging out of research conducted at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in the summer of 2012 – draws attention to an otherwise underrated link between Chatterton and Wilde. Chatterton composed his best works under the assumed identity of an imaginary fifteenth-century priest, Thomas Rowley. Going a step further, Wilde ventriloquised the poetic identities of literary predecessors like Keats, Shelley, De Quincey, Rossetti, and Macpherson. Wilde deemed Chatterton the 'father of the Romantics' and lectured on his work at Birkbeck College in 1886. In their introduction, Bristow and Mitchell propose that 'Chatterton catalyzed Wilde's interest in the thematic and psychological links between creative agency and criminality, originality and artifice' (p. 28). This statement culminates in one of the most erudite and widely-researched literary biographies of Wilde and Chatterton. It becomes clear that both writers' acts of literary plagiarism were premised upon a sustained and self-reflexive subversion of what we now identify in postmodern theory as the 'author-function'.[1]

[1] The term was developed by Michel Foucault in his 1969 essay 'What is an Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 197–211.

The link between art and crime in the nineteenth century was most prominently highlighted in Simon Joyce's essay, 'Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties' (2002). Joyce traced Wilde's amoral (and, some would say, 'criminal' or 'degenerate') approach to art to Thomas De Quincey's 1827 essay, 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. Wilde wrote a rather De Quinceyan biography in 1891 of the eighteenth-century poet, painter, and poisoner, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, which he titled 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study in Green'. Here, Wilde argued that there was no essential incongruity between criminal and aesthetic impulses and that art could, in fact, benefit from rebellious criminal energy. Unlike Joyce, Bristow and Mitchell focus on Wilde's uncannily similar appreciation for Chatterton's 'art of forgery':

> In what ways then were the suicidal Chatterton and the murderous Wainewright entwined in Wilde's imagination? Both subjects were forgers, executing varieties of such deceit for similar ends. Chatterton's fakes were exclusively literary acts of deception that he carried out in part to reap financial rewards with very mixed success. The extravagant Wainewright's forgeries counterfeited signatures so that he could gain access to moneys tied up in a family trust. (p. 217)

The most brilliant aspect of *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton* is how Bristow and Mitchell construct a sub-genre within Wilde's canon called 'artful criminality' (p. 215). They show how, in works such as 'The Decay of Lying' (1891), 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' (1889) and 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' (1891), Wilde 'puts into fictional practice' his philosophy of Art for Art's Sake (p. 246). For Wilde, plagiarism, forgery, piracy, reproduction, reduplication, and misattribution were not crimes if the consequent work of art complied with the highest standards of beauty and aesthetic merit.

It is worth clarifying that at no point do Bristow and Mitchell condone plagiarism or forgery. They strive, instead, to define and delimit what constituted the 'art of forgery' in the late-Victorian period. Scholars of Victorian forgery will find extremely useful the extensive bibliography that Bristow and Mitchell have compiled on the topic. From Walter Arthur Copinger's 1870 text on copyright law and Thomas Mallon's 1989 work *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism*, to more contemporary books like Aviva Briefel's *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) or Robert Macfarlane's *Original Copy: Plagiarism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2007), the scope of their bibliography extends far beyond the lives of either Wilde or Chatterton. It would, however, have been interesting to see some overarching theoretical engagement with postmodern theories of authorship. Only Laura Savu's fascinating observations on the persistence of Victorian bourgeois morality in copyright law in her 2009 book, *Postmortem*

Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative, makes an appearance. Elana Gomel's essay, 'Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)death of the Author' (2004), would have made a valuable addition to this bibliography as she also addresses the violent and aporitic relationship between the author and his work as represented in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Several important keywords elaborating nineteenth-century attitudes to crime and art develop from Bristow and Mitchell's research on forgery. They can be grouped into three categories: *nature*, *creativity*, and *crime*. In *nature*, we see vestiges of the Platonic indictment against art that Wilde and Chatterton challenge through their 'art of forgery'. Keywords like 'true source', 'copy', 'authentick', 'original', 'echo', 'artifice', 'identity', and 'genuine' appear and reappear throughout the book. Chapter five, titled 'Wilde, Forgery, and Crime', makes a significant leap from *nature* to *crime* by focusing not only on Wainewright as a forger and murderer, but also on how these two modes of deviance were fused in criminological tracts by Havelock Ellis and Max Nordau. From this chapter onwards, we see an increased occurrence of legal words such as 'inquiry', 'confession', 'inquest', and 'examination', especially when related to 'attribution', 'copyright', 'intellectual property', 'plagiarism', and 'self-plagiarism'. Bristow and Mitchell's literary history of forgery (over mere literary criticism) skilfully delves into the nineteenth century without resurrecting its moral biases. They are able to link otherwise morally contradictory keywords like 'genuine' and 'genius' or 'artifice' and 'artificer'. Their underlying claim is that Wilde's 'inquiries into Chatterton's career mark the moment his attention was for the first time fixed on the paradoxical links between the creation of unsurpassed beauty and unrepentant acts of fabrication: not just creating forgeries but also fabricating lies, performing roles, and donning masks' (p. 214).

The actual instances of plagiarism discussed in this book do, however, need to be nuanced from the outset. There is an important distinction between how Chatterton commits poetic forgery in the guise of Thomas Rowley and Wilde's alleged 'plagiarism' in the 'Chatterton Notebook'. Although Bristow and Mitchell acquit Wilde on the grounds that this notebook is nothing but a notebook and 'not a completed work of art' (p. 160), they do not sufficiently theorise the difference between 'copy' as counterfeit and citation. The former is indubitably a criminal act, whereas the latter is the foundation for scrupulous literary and academic writing in general. It is the difference between representation as 'proxy' (*vetreten*) versus 'portrait' (*darstellen*), which Marx elucidates in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852).[2] Wilde maintains this difference between proxy and portrait in his use of the word 'portrait' in 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' and the word 'picture'

[2] Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak draws attention to the distinction between representation as proxy versus portrait by referring to *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 275-76.

in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Consequently, in Bristow and Mitchell's analysis, forgery is treated more as a metaphor than as a specific unlawful act. Samuel Johnson's definition of plagiarism in his dictionary, along with actual historical cases of copyright infringement such as 'Dickens v. Lee (1884)', are invoked far too late to be of any use in a definitional way. Had Bristow and Mitchell structured their argument to include these period-specific definitions of forgery and plagiarism in the very first chapter, alongside a facsimile of Wilde's 'Chatterton Notebook' (which is relegated to the Appendix), the distinction between proxy and portrait (and thereby crime and art) would have been more transparent.

Carlo Ginzburg's seminal essay, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method' (1980), comes to mind here. His first case study of the nineteenth-century art historian Giovanni Morelli is particularly fascinating. Morelli recommended that instead of examining the most obvious characteristics of a famous painting in order to detect forgery, one must 'concentrate on minor details, especially those least significant in the style typical of the painter's own school: earlobes, fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes' (p. 7). By comparing these trace details, the original could be distinguished from the counterfeit. Needless to say, the expert knowledge of the art historian is separated here from the criminal and unlawful intentions of the forger. Ginzburg connects 'Morellianism' to the criminological method of Sherlock Holmes and the psychoanalytic method of Sigmund Freud to show how the 'truth' of art, sex, and crime was discursively constructed in the nineteenth century. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that homosexuality – at least the brand of dandyism and effeminacy popularised by Wilde and his circle – was also considered to be a counterfeit, inferior copy, forgery, or inversion of the so-called 'truth' of sex. Bristow and Mitchell bring Victorian attitudes towards male homosexuality into the fold in their analysis of 'The Portrait of Mr W.H'. They argue that 'the falseness of the beautiful forged object is not necessarily a disavowal of an otherwise unrepresented homoeroticism'. In fact, they maintain that 'the faking of Cyril Graham's portrait of W. H. remains central to its status as a supreme work of art' (p. 298). This is precisely what allows Bristow and Mitchell to offer the convincing conclusion that, in the nineteenth century, the 'art of forgery' exemplified 'a true inventiveness that is both artful and aesthetic'.

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