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ОСНОВНЫЕ ПРИЧИНЫ СТАНОВЛЕНИЯ МИСТИФИКАЦИИ В ЛИТЕРАТУРНОМ НАСЛЕДИИ ТОМАСА ЧАТТЕРТОНА

THE REASONS WHY MYSTIFICATION BECAME THE CORNERSTONE OF THOMAS CHATTERTON'S LITERARY LEGACY

В статье рассматриваются основные причины, побудившие Томаса Чаттертона прибегнуть к литературной мистификации как к основному способу выражения своих творческих позывов, амбиций и самоутверждения в английском обществе середины XVIII века. Спектр этих причин включает в себя такие аспекты, как некоторые биографические факторы и социальное окружение Чаттертона, психологические особенности его личности, его особое восприятие истории, литературные тенденции в эпоху короля Георга III, а также тяжелое материальное положение и сильное стремление из него выбраться при помощи «будущей» славы молодого поэта.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: *литературная мистификация*; *античный стиль*; *литературные тенденции*; *литературная выразительность*; *рукописи.*

The article dwells upon the major reasons which made Thomas Chatterton resort to the use of literary mystification as the best way to express his artistic talent. The spectrum of those reasons ranges from the ongoing literary tendencies of that era, Chatterton's own perception of history, his craving for fame and recognition, his psychological traits, to his dire financial situation.

K e y w o r d s: *literary mystification*; *antique style*; *literary tendencies*; *literary expression*; *manuscripts.*

The literary scene in England in the middle of the 18th century was extraordinarily diverse, giving rise to various new tendencies, styles, movements, and ways of creating new patterns of thinking, writing, and appreciation of literature itself. What is particularly peculiar about that era is the emergence of a number of literary mystifications, the authors of which were trying to pass them off as genuine medieval texts. One of the most striking examples of this sort of writing were the *Rowley poems* created by the then 16-year-old boy, Thomas Chatterton (there is enough evidence to suggest that by the age of sixteen, Chatterton had already completed most of his antique "translations") [1, p. 27], paving the way for the birth of the Romantic age in English literature and tremendously affecting the creative endeavors of such masters of English poetry as Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. So, the best exemplars of the English literary elite of the late 18th century were primarily influenced by a 16-year-old, the "marvelous Boy", and regarded him a poet of immense talent and incredibly

vivid and acute imagination. But what were T. Chatterton's reasons for creating his alter ego, Thomas Rowley, a priest of Bristol of the 15th century and the alleged author of those literary antiques? The answer to these questions is the main proposition of this article, i.e., to ascertain the specific circumstances and conditions which made T. Chatterton get deeply entangled, explore and, literarily, relive the medieval age of chivalry and knighthood, while living in penury and struggling with the harsh reality of his own time, dealing with his own ambitions, pride, insecurity, his definitely neurotic condition, severe depression, anxiety, utter despair and frustration bordering on madness, induced by the rejection of his literary talent by the acknowledged "connoisseurs" of English literature.

To even begin to speculate about the true motives why T. Chatterton got himself caught in and completely immersed in his imaginary medieval world, one should be entirely aware that literary mystifications were quite a common phenomenon in England not only some decades before Chatterton's birth, but also during his own short-lived and tragic life. Let us focus on five most striking examples which Chatterton was, undoubtedly, aware of, as they caused a huge furor amongst the literary circles of the mid- 18th century England, and Chatterton, considering himself a master poet, was right in the vortex of those discussions.

In 1722, Jonathan Swift anonymously published a short treatise entitled *The Last Speech and Dying Words of Ebenezer Elliston; who was Executed the second day of May, 1722. Published at his Desire for the Common Good.* In this tract, Elliston, a condemned criminal, professedly reveals the names of all his rogue companions (including the names of people who receive and sell stolen property), all their crimes he is aware of and their meeting-grounds [2, p. 110]. Elliston allegedly does this in writing and leaves this information to the authorities. The treatise ends with Elliston's last words: "Good people, fare ye well; bad as I am, I leave many worse behind me. I hope you shall see me die like a man the death of a dog." [3, p. 306]. Did Elliston exist? Yes, he did. Was he executed on that day? Yes, he was. But did he make that statement? No, he did not. J. Swift made it all up for one simple reason, i.e., in those days Dublin was infested with all kinds of thieves, robbers, and murderers. By fabricating this tract, Swift hoped to bring down the crime rate in Dublin, and it worked.

Six years after, The Rev. Dr. Innes, who was a preacher at St. Margaret's, Westminster, did not experience any moral turbulence when he published under his own name a book entitled *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue,* shamelessly dedicating it to Lord Chancellor. The truth of the matter is, that book was actually written by Dr. Campbell of St. Andrew's Church who simply sent the manuscript to his colleague to get his "professional" opinion [2, p. 109].

In 1744, eight years prior to Chatterton's birth, Richard Rolt (a very prolific writer of the day) simply wiped out his good reputation for posterity when he unscrupulously published Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* (the first edition of which Akenside issued anonymously) under his own name! [2, p. 109].

In 1760, when Chatterton was eight years of age, James Macpherson caused a national sensation by releasing his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language.* This work was followed by *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books* (1762), then *Temora* (1763) and finally *The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (1765). As Macpherson explained to the public, he collected those pieces of ancient Scottish poetry in the Highlands (but, for some strange reason, omitted to mention his sources) before he translated them into modern English [4, p. 113]. After some period of great success amongst the public, the literary scholars started to raise their suspicions about the alleged authenticity of Macpherson's translations, clearly and openly calling him a forger, pointing out with disdain and indignation that Macpherson (though he did go to the Highlands and listened to some elders and their ancient folklore) made most of it up, masquerading his own writing under the guise of ancient Scottish lore. Macpherson, outraged by these allegations, refused to defend in public the authenticity of *Ossian* [4, p. 115].

In 1764, when Chatterton was fourteen, Horace Walpole (Chatterton's failed sponsor) published his magnum opus *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story.* The first edition was a clear mystification itself for the text purported to be a mere translation of an Italian novel allegedly written by some monk at Naples in 1529. Walpole even signed it with the name of "William Marshal" as his own pseudonym. In reality, there was no translation, no ancient Italian priest, and no William Marshal, i.e., Horace Walpole invented the whole thing for he was not certain how the public would react to this kind of story. Once he noticed a wave of admiration, he came out clean, "asking pardon" for the hoax and claiming his true authorship. Ironically, the person who (many people think) was the final nail in the coffin of Chatterton, was a mystificator himself! Besides, Walpole had already been patron for another shrewd and successful mystificator, i.e., Macpherson.

Was T. Chatterton aware of all those (and many more) mystifications? Of course, he was. He was probably giving his firm judgment on these matters when he was a regular of the Chapter coffee-house in London, where authors, booksellers and publishers would discuss the recent news and gossip around the town. With the exception of The Rev. Dr. Innes and R. Rolt, the mystifications of J. Swift, J. Macpherson and H. Walpole proved to be quite successful and delivered considerable fame (though Macpherson's reputation got tarnished) and a handsome income to the authors. Fame and income. Did this thought ever cross Chatterton's mind? The answer is, unequivocally, yes. Actually, the precise lack of fame and income was, by all means, one of the major factors that moved Chatterton to his sad fate at age seventeen on that tragic night in Brooke Street on the 24th of August, 1770.

When Chatterton was about fourteen, one day he approached his acquaintance, Mr. Burgum, a pewterer in Bristol, astounding him with the news that the latter was, indeed, a descendent of some really noble families in England. Accordingly, Chatterton produced a manuscript book, entitled, *Account of the*

Family of the De Berghams, from the Norman Conquest to this Time. Chatterton had no trouble convincing Mr. Burgum that this account represented Burgum's real family history, which Chatterton was able to trace by a thorough analysis of old deeds, ancient parchments, and genealogy books. The document itself looked very authentic to naive Burgum for Chatterton made use of ochre, smoke, and black lead to make the document appear really obsolete. Astonished, Mr. Burgum willingly paid five shillings to the young boy. Some days later, Chatterton presented his friend with *A Continuation of the Account of the Family of the De Berghams, from the Norman Conquest to this Time.* In those two accounts, Chatterton presented an elaborate outline of great names, intermarriages, the names of castles, old deeds, he even included the name of a poet, John de Bergham, Burgum's supposed ancestor, and inserted his own poem, entitled, "The Romaunte of the Cnychte". It goes without saying, that the language of the above-mentioned poem was completely unintelligible and way too recondite for Mr. Burgum to even begin to understand, so Chatterton provided his own rendition of the poem to modern English [1]. This whole thing was nothing but an ingenuine hoax, undertaken by Chatterton to earn some extra money, and he came out victorious and "inspired". Chatterton did not stop with Mr. Burgum's hoax, he had another acquaintance, Mr. Barrett, a surgeon in Bristol, dabbling in literature, antiquarian art and writing his own History of Bristol. Chatterton had no problem with abundantly supplying Mr. Barrett with all kinds of old deeds, records, accounts of ancient festivities, ceremonies, and other documents alike. As a result of this relationship, a handsome amount of money was transferred from the purse of Mr. Barrett to the pocket of Chatterton. Indeed, Chatterton proved to be an ingenuine forger of ancient documents. It should also be noted that he had a particular delight in misleading people and on top of that he really wanted money (not solely for himself, but to help his striving mother and sister). For himself, Chatterton wanted one thing above all, i.e., fame. One may wonder, what was going through his mind at that point. If he was so gifted and talented at forging documents, why not try forging literature? He was a sworn poet from age eleven, after all. And that is exactly what he endeavored to arduously pursue from then on.

Unequivocally, Chatterton's forte was the antique. The Romantic age in England was jump-started by Chatterton's *Rowley Poems*, not by his numerous other pieces of all forms which were published in a number of London periodicals (including poetical columns of various newspapers). It appears that there is a certain routine, certain conditions, unique with each individual, which help him reveal his artistic impulses and desires. Chatterton did not just choose the antique; it seems he was born into the world of the antique to begin with. It must be briefly noted that Chatterton, at the age of seven, was admitted to Colston's Hospital, i.e., the charity school erected to resemble Christ's Hospital in London. There the boy was taught elementary subjects and received some instructions concerning catechisms and various church services. A particular feature of the school was that the scholars all had to wear mediaeval monkish garb [5. p. 227]. Unequivocally,

the scholars' habiliments made a deep impression on the mind of the young boy. Apart from that, the Chattertons had been sextons of St. Mary Redcliffe Church in Bristol (Chatterton's favorite place to wile away leisure hours at) for at least one hundred and fifty years [1]. Chatterton learned how to read from a black letter Bible (a very important fact) and since very early childhood he spent days wandering through the precincts of the church, staring at its gothic cathedral ceilings, walking amongst its columns, looking at its wall engravings, ancient tombs and monuments, opening up old chests in the muniment-room, leafing through old parchments, chantries, maps, plans, vestry deeds, and ancient scrolls filled with all sorts of heraldic symbols, staring out of the church medieval stained glass windows, listening to the chime of the tower bells and pipe organ music, breathing the church air… This was the world Chatterton was born into. The church of St. Mary occupied a focal point in the mind of young Chatterton. He seemed to be living in two completely different worlds simultaneously, i.e., the reign of king George III on the one hand, and the world of William Canynge, a liberal merchant and five times Mayor of Bristol, who brought the construction of the church to its completion in the 15th century. The world of king George III Chatterton simply endured, but the world of William Canynge was Chatterton's strongest fascination and obsession. In this latter world he invented a supposed priest of the 15th century, Thomas Rowley of St. John in the city of Bristol, whose manuscripts he "miraculously" came across in the muniment-room of the church of St. Mary, thus becoming the "translator" of Rowley's writings. Also, while perusing all those miscellaneous ancient parchments and records, Chatterton seemed to have learned to decipher some of them and "… out of those papers he may have derived hints that were of use to him in his attempt to represent the circumstances of Canynge's life." [1, p. 47]. And, consequently, Chatterton became obsessed with writing his own account of Bristol of the 15th century. A very important fact to understand is that with all that mystification surrounding *Rowley Poems,* Chatterton was not just writing history, he was creating his own history, filling it with imaginary or semi-fictitious characters "… whom he thought proper to group around Canynge…" [1, p. 47]. Whenever Chatterton had completed a new Rowley poem, he would give it to his friend, Mr. George Catcott, an antiquarian in Bristol, and get paid. This literary mystification seemed to be working out just fine, i.e., Chatterton delighted in what he loved to do most (writing verses), many people were misled, he appeared to have won a good reputation in Bristol, his writings were regarded (at least by some people at that time) to be the examples of the finest poetry and he was getting remunerated for his endeavors. The future opportunities looked very promissing and life seemed to be working out for the young boy in 1767.

Considering all of the above, some conclusions must be made. Firstly, when Chatterton was born, the literary mystification had already been an ongoing phenomenon in England and, tempted by it, Chatterton, craving for fame, and want of money, before turning fifteen years of age, "resolved to turn what was best and

most original in his genius, his enthusiasm for the antique, into the service of his worst propensities. In other words, he resolved to adopt, with certain variations and adaptations to his own case, the trick of Macpherson." [1, p. 51]. Besides, Chatterton's mind was infused by the then current Walpole's ingenious literary hoax surrounding his *Castle of Otranto*, which the latter disguised as an ancient manuscript written by some obscure Italian monk. Consequently, Chatterton was "inspired" to undertake something similar.

Secondly, he was a descendant of three generations of sextons of the church of St. Mary Redcliffe with which he became fascinated to the point of obsession. That church, with all its ancient history, opened up its gates for the young boy to the world of the obsolete, and that is where Chatterton's heart beat most nobly. The church of St. Mary came to be the foundation stone upon which Chatterton built his own artificially-antique style of writing and his own history of Bristol of the 15th century. There is no surprise that he chose exactly this kind of literary expression. It started off as a mere playful exercise which became a habit, the habit culminated to his obsession with the antique and from that point on, there was no way of retracting from it. Mr. Burgum hoax was just the beginning, a mere practice for the 14-year-old Chatterton where his invented ancient English poet, John de Bergham, would become the prototype of Thomas Rowley, a parish priest of St. John, and a good friend of William Canynge.

Thirdly, at Colston's, where Chatterton spent seven years of rigid education, the main subject on the curriculum was the rigorous and meticulous study of divinity, and prior to that, having learned how to read from a black letter Bible, should it then come as a surprise that he settled on a mediaeval monk as his alter ego?

Ultimately, Chatterton had to face the consequences of his Rowley mystification, i.e., whether to admit his fabrication of literature and history, or to keep insisting on the authenticity of his *Rowley Poems.* David Masson put it pretty straightforward in his famous essay on Chatterton, when he wrote: "Would it have been better for Chatterton had he made the attempt? Who can tell? On the one hand, by refraining from it, he moved to a fate sad enough; on the other, he might have lived on a hardened literary liar." [1, p. 205]. Chatterton never acknowledged his Rowley mystification and, while living in a garret room in Brooke Street, being almost famished, comitted suicide by swallowing arsenic in water [6, p. 100] laced with opium on the 24th of August, 1770.

Six years after, Dr. Johnson visited Bristol, trying to acquire some information about Chatterton. He met with Mr. Barrett and Mr. Catcott, who showed him the original manuscripts and "the chest" in the muniment-room of the church of St. Mary. After perusing the manuscripts for a while, he concluded that Chatterton was a forger, but this fact did not prevent Dr. Johnson from making his famous statement: "This is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge: it is wonderful how the whelp has written such things" [1, p. 264].

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