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Pages 95-112 | Published online: 04 Jun 2008

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/09697259608571885

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THE MACARONI PARSON AND THE MARVELLOUS BOY

literature and forgery in the eighteenth century

Readers of *The Westminster Gazette* of 4-8 February 1777 might have been intrigued to discover the following cryptic item tucked away in an apparently arbitrary stream of information on p.3: 'Last night the Rev. — — was committed to the Poultry Compter by the Right Ho. the Lord Mayor, for a capital forgery upon the E— of C—'. This tiny hint was the seed of a huge outpouring of newspaper (and other) print over the next six months. On p.4 enough hints were given to identify the clergyman in question (though no names were given) as Dr William Dodd, the fashionably sentimental preacher and supporter of good causes. By 10 February the papers had the whole story; he had been arrested at his home in London for the forgery of a bond to the value of £4,200 in the name of the Earl of Chesterfield. There were no headlines in eighteenth-century newspapers, and no illustrations; nonetheless this was a sensational event, or series of events; Dodd's imprisonment, trial and execution at Tyburn in the teeth of public opposition were a ready source of extraordinary domestic news to savour against the disturbing events in America.[1]

But there were other, smaller events as well. Dodd was arrested on 7 February; on 8 February, *The Gazetteer* ran an advertisement for:

> Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by THOMAS ROWLEY, and others, in the 15th century. The greatest part now published from the most authentic copies, with an engraved specimen of one of the MSS.

This also was the herald of a fierce public discussion about forgery; another kind of authenticity, another kind of manuscript. Literature shadows history. The newspapers and periodicals of early 1777 treat the case of Dodd as a major theme, but it is disconcertingly criss-crossed by reviews of Rowley, extracts from the poems and rumours of their connection with an obscure boy-poet called Chatterton.[2] To eighteenth-century scholars, these are two well-known cases, but they are not usually seen this close together; I do not think the coincidence has been noted before, and the newspapers themselves do not make any particular point of it. In terms of the minute particulars of concrete experience, there is some reason not to equate Dodd with Chatterton, and although I design to use these two cases to trace some of the cultural meanings of 'forgery', an initial conception of difference is essential as a marker in the processes to be discussed. The poems and documents which make up *Rowley* were reviewed, questioned, analysed, and finally reattributed as the work of their putative finder, Thomas Chatterton; but the literary system was much slower to estab-

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