

## FROM FORGER TO AUTHOR: WILLIAM HENRY IRELAND'S SHAKESPEARE PAPERS

By *John Ridpath*

It took over one hundred years for William Shakespeare to gain the literary pre-eminence familiar to contemporary readers. A renewed interest in the author's work during the eighteenth century was marked by theatrical revivals, new editions of the plays and renowned Shakespearean performances by famed actor David Garrick. But with this resurgence in popularity, some readers began to call attention to perceived gaps in the bard's biography. In the mid-1790s, these gaps were briefly filled with 'newly discovered' letters, deeds and occasional poetry, exhibited to the public and finally published in 1796. Forged by William Henry Ireland, these documents refashioned Shakespeare to the tastes of his age.<sup>1</sup> The forger went on to make larger creative impositions upon the life and work of the dramatist, writing himself into the playwright's life and adapting his plays to meet eighteenth-century standards of decorum. And by the 1790s, literary forgery itself 'bordered on a literary genre with its own kinds of rules and aspirations'.<sup>2</sup> Enthralled by the notoriety of other literary forgers, Ireland created his own literature under a Shakespearean guise. Whilst his forgeries were quickly exposed, they ultimately served Ireland in establishing a literary identity of his own.

The ascent of Shakespeare's literary reputation in the eighteenth century was made possible through various constructions of an 'eighteenth century Shakespeare'. In his sympathetic account of the forgeries, Bernard Grebanier explores the context of such contemporaneous transformations of Shakespeare:

It is seriously to be doubted that the age worshiped the Bard with any true appreciation or for the right reasons. Garrick, for instance, who did so much *for* him, did, like all the other neo-classical adapters, quite as much *to* Shakespeare. Consider, for instance, his complacent mangling of *Hamlet*.<sup>3</sup>

If 'complacent mangling' was perpetrated by such an illustrious figure as Garrick, he concludes, 'what was to be expected of others who succumbed to Shakespearolatry?'<sup>4</sup> But for Shakespeare to become

accepted as the dramatic idol that Garrick intended, he had to assume a form compatible with his audience's tastes. James Boswell attended the actor's 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee, and in a letter to *The London Magazine*, describes the event in neo-classicist terms typical of his age:

[It was] an elegant and truly classical celebration of the memory of Shakespeare, that illustrious poet, whom all ages will admire as the world has hitherto done. It was truly an antique idea, a Grecian thought, to institute a splendid festival in honour of a bard.<sup>5</sup>

In his letter Boswell goes on to call Garrick 'the colourist of Shakespeare's soul'; Ireland's forgeries operate on a similar impulse, adapting the life of Shakespeare to contemporary tastes much as poets had adapted his drama. Throughout the forgeries we encounter Nicholas Rowe's Shakespeare: 'he was in himself a good-natur'd man, of great sweetness in his manners, and a most agreeable companion'.<sup>6</sup> A 'Profession of Faith' allays suspicions of Shakespeare's Catholicism, and playhouse receipts 'prove *Shakspear* correct in matters of the most trivial nature'.<sup>7</sup> By way of a trite love poem addressed to 'Anna Hatherrewaye', Ireland constructs his bard as a devoted husband too:

Is there inne heavenne aught more rare  
Thanne thou sweete Nympe of Avon fayre  
Is there onne Earthe a Manne more trewe  
Thanne Willy Shakspeare is toe you<sup>8</sup>

And in correspondence with the patron of his early narrative poems, the Earl of Southampton, 'Willy Shakspeare' conducts himself with anachronistic gentility: his gratitude is 'tooe greate and tooe sublyme a feeling for poor mortalls toe expresse', signing a letter 'Yours devotedlye and withe due respecte'.<sup>9</sup> This letter, 'purely eighteenth century in its inflated emotions',<sup>10</sup> was presented to his father, Samuel Ireland, accompanied by a further letter in which Southampton speaks of Shakespeare

<sup>5</sup> James Boswell, 'On Shakespeare's Jubilee at Stratford Upon Avon', *The London Magazine*, 38 (Sept. 1769), 451-54 (p.451).

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Dramatick Works* (Edinburgh: Gordon et al, 1792) p.5.

<sup>7</sup> W.H. Ireland, *An Authentic Account of the Shaksperian Manuscripts* (London: J. Debrett, 1796), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Ireland, *Miscellaneous Papers* (London: Cooper and Graham, 1796), p.29. References are to the page image numbers of the electronic text at *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.31.

<sup>10</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p.84.

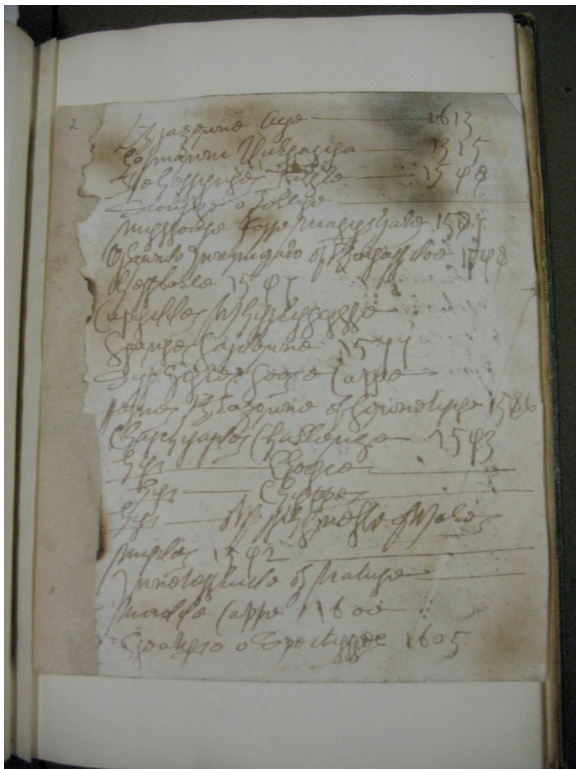
<sup>1</sup> Bernard Grebanier, *The Great Shakespeare Forgery* (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.23.

accepting only half of his remuneration, illuminating ‘another aspect of the character of an eighteenth-century gentleman born two hundred years before his time’.<sup>11</sup>



Shakespeare's manuscript catalogue of his library, as forged by William Henry Ireland c.1796. University College London Library Special Collections, MS Ogen 54. Photograph by John Ridpath, reproduced by permission of UCL Special Collections.

Having coloured Shakespeare's life, Ireland's attention turned to his texts, adjusting them to contemporary standards. In his *Confessions* he states that 'it was generally deemed extraordinary' that his plays were 'so very unequal' and contained 'so much ribaldry'.<sup>12</sup> Responding to such concerns, Ireland produced Shakespeare's complete original manuscript of *King Lear*, making alterations where he 'thought the lines beneath him'.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently he 'discovered' several leaves, supposedly from the original *Hamlet* manuscript, to strengthen this sense of 'Shakespeare's correctness as a writer',<sup>14</sup> selecting a scene lending itself to censorship:

*Ham.* Ladie, shall I lye in your Lap?  
*Oph.* No my Lord.  
*Ham.* I meane, my Head upon your Lap?

*Oph.* I my Lord.  
*Ham.* Do you thinke I meant Countrey matters?  
*Oph.* I thinke nothing, my Lord.  
*Ham.* That's a fair thought to lye between Maids legs.  
*Oph.* What is my Lord?  
*Ham.* Nothing.  
*Oph.* You are merrie, my Lord?<sup>15</sup>

Set alongside the original Folio text, closely adopted in this scene by the 1792 edition of Shakespeare's *Works*, it is clear that 'Ireland was a highly moral forger'.<sup>16</sup>

*Ham.* Shall I lye i youre Lappe swette Ladye  
*Oph.* Aye mye Lorde  
*Ham.* I meane mye heade onne youre Lappe  
 Forre I meante notte Countrye Matterres  
*Oph.* You are merrye mye Lorde<sup>17</sup>

This is certainly an extensive revision, but even Ireland maintains more of the original text than the heavily-cut scene acted at Drury Lane in his lifetime: '*Ham.* Lady, shall I lie in your lap? / *Oph.* You are merry, my lord'.<sup>18</sup> Through creative rewriting rather than straightforward omission, Ireland's *Hamlet* clarifies his meaning in a manner atypical of Shakespeare's riddling and playful protagonist, the young forger giving the dramatist a voice that anticipates and censures bawdy textual intrusion. With characteristic self-righteousness, Ireland makes the fatuous claim that in this respect his forgeries actually assisted Shakespeare's reputation:

By such alterations the world supposed that all the ribaldry in his other plays was not written by himself but foistered in by the players and printers, herein it cannot be said I injured the reputation of *Shakespeare*, on the contrary, the world thought him a much more pure and even writer than before.<sup>19</sup>

In this way the forger rewrote Shakespeare's plays into the wider beliefs of his own day, producing original 'evidence' of the playwright's perfection.

As if not content with his documentary 'discoveries', which aroused interest owing to

<sup>11</sup> S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p.203.

<sup>12</sup> W.H. Ireland, *The Confessions of William Henry Ireland* (London: Ellerton and Byworth, 1805), p.115.

<sup>13</sup> Ireland, *Authentic Account*, p.18.

<sup>14</sup> Ireland, *Confessions*, p.119.

<sup>15</sup> Charlton Hinman, *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Norton, 1996), ll.1966-75.

<sup>16</sup> Schoenbaum, *Lives*, p.212.

<sup>17</sup> Ireland, *Misc. Papers*, ll.1878-82.

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. A tragedy. As it is acted at the Theatres- Royal in Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden* (London: Harrison, 1779), p.13.

<sup>19</sup> Ireland, *Authentic Account*, p.19

Shakespeare rather than their discoverer, a self-fashioned ‘giddy thoughtless young man, incapable of producing the papers’,<sup>20</sup> Ireland wrote himself into Shakespeare’s life. A ‘Deed of Gift to Ireland’ has Shakespeare recount the extraordinary story by which a contemporary ‘William Henry Ireland’ saved his life in 1604:

havyng with mye goode freynde Masterre  
William Henrye Irelande ande otherres taene  
boate neare untowe myne house afowresaid  
wee dydd purpose goynge upp Thames butte  
those thatte were soe toe connducte us beyng  
muche toe merye throughe Lyquorre theye  
didd upsette our fowresayde bayrge alle butte  
myeselfe savedd themselves bye swimmyng ...  
Masterre William henrye Irelande notte  
seeynge mee dydd aske for mee butte oune of  
the Companye dydd answerre thatte I was  
drownyng onn the whyche he pulledd off hys  
Jerrekynne and Jumpedd inn afterre mee with  
muche paynes he draggedd mee for the I  
beyng then nearelye deade and soe he dydd  
save mye life<sup>21</sup>

William Henry explained his motivation for this forgery as ‘the general opinion, that if a descendant of *Shakspear’s* could be found, he might claim the papers’, and to this end, he ‘determined on proving that a friendship had subsisted between our *Bard* and some person of the name *Ireland*’.<sup>22</sup> Luckily for the forger there had indeed been a William Ireland living at Blackfriars in 1604, and moreover in the very property that Shakespeare bought some nine years later, a context which gave the fabrication some superficial plausibility.<sup>23</sup> The deed goes on to bequeath the manuscripts of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *King John*, *King Lear* and the ‘neverr yett impryntedd’ *Henry III* to Shakespeare’s rescuer, the profits of which are to be enjoyed thereafter by his immediate next of kin and ‘soe on for everre inn hys lynne’.<sup>24</sup> However, even if establishing the Irelands’ ownership of the documents was his initial motive, it was not the sole one: the ‘Shakespearean’ poem ‘*Tributary Lines to Ireland*’ is deeply narcissistic in its praise of the forger’s imagined ancestor:

O Modelle of Virretue Charytyes sweeteste  
Chylde thye Shakpeare thanks thee  
Norre Verse norre Sygh norre Teare canne  
paynte mye Soule norre saye bye

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.23.

<sup>21</sup> Ireland, *Misc. Papers*, p.42.

<sup>22</sup> Ireland, *Authentic Account*, p.22.

<sup>23</sup> Schoenbaum, *Lives*, p.213.

<sup>24</sup> Ireland, *Misc. Papers*, p.42-3.

halfe howe muche I love thee<sup>25</sup>

Illustrating ‘the forger’s pathetic identification with his subject’, Ireland purposefully imagines an affectionate companionship between Shakespeare and a relative of the same name.<sup>26</sup> After the ready acceptance of the forgeries by a growing circle of subscribers mentioned in his father’s publication, he gained an increasing confidence in his own creative powers, and would see himself also as a companion in Shakespeare’s literary genius.

In the context of changing attitudes to literary forgery, Ireland could regard his Shakespearean impositions as evidencing an authorial identity of his own. At a young age Ireland had encountered Herbert Croft’s epistolary novel *Love and Madness*, a ‘very entertaining work’, and a huge influence on his forgeries.<sup>27</sup> Of particular interest are the digressions contemplating the careers of eighteenth-century forgers, imbued as they are with ‘the perverted sympathies of the approved sentimentalist’:<sup>28</sup>

They who do not refuse their admiration of the compositions, still think themselves justified to abuse [the forger], for pretending *not* to be the author of what they still admire. Is not this strange?<sup>29</sup>

The account of Thomas Chatterton, forger of medieval poetry under the guise of an imaginary monk named Thomas Rowley, is of particular interest. Croft praises Chatterton as ‘our Bristol Shakspear’, and argues that the brilliance of his poems negates the concept of ‘literary forgery’:

For Chatterton’s sake the English language should add another word to its dictionary and should not suffer the same term to signify a crime for which a man suffers the most ignominious punishment, and the deception of ascribing a false antiquity of two or three centuries to compositions for which the author’s name deserves to live forever.<sup>30</sup>

William Ireland surely could not have missed the parallel with his own situation in Croft’s recognition that ‘the same Christian name should belong to the finder, and to the author of these

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.46.

<sup>26</sup> Schoenbaum, *Lives*, p.215.

<sup>27</sup> Ireland, *Confessions*, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Croft, *Love and Madness*, 4th edn. (London: Kearsly, 1780), p.33.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.128; 138.

poems; Thomas Rowley, Thomas Chatterton'.<sup>31</sup> To adopt the title of one of the forger's later works, the Romantic poets of Ireland's generation would go on to venerate Chatterton as a 'neglected genius'.<sup>32</sup> And in this work, in anticipation of later poetic tributes to the forger, Ireland included a 'Writer's Address', 'Elegaic Stanzas' and an acrostic poem, all dedicated to Chatterton. The work even included 'Stanzas in Imitation of Chatterton's Rowley Manuscripts', an imitation of an imitation.<sup>33</sup> Thus Ireland came to regard his own forgeries, like Chatterton's, as literature; 'forger' became 'author'.

With forgery constituting a valid genre in Ireland's mind, the success of his own creative appropriations soon led to a desire for recognition as their author. The very acceptance of his *Vortigern* play as genuine demonstrated to him that his own literary powers were only as limited as Shakespeare's sometimes were:

At the time of it's completion, I was about nineteen years of age, the world praised many parts, but said it was uneven, having the same errors as are usually found in many of *Shakspear's* plays, it was generally thought superior to the worst of his plays, and much inferior to his capital ones; I heard and smiled at these remarks, not a little surprised that I could at so young an age at all imitate him.<sup>34</sup>

Such remarks are likely to have fully awakened literary pretensions in the forger. As a cover story for the mysterious emergence of the Shakespeare papers, he had told his father that he had discovered them in a chest in the possession of an elusive gentleman who wished to conceal his identity. Ireland Senior engaged in an exchange of letters with this gentleman, who remained known to him only as 'Mr H.' and was in actual fact his son assuming yet another identity. Ireland Junior dutifully responded with yet another series of forgeries that illustrate a growing belief in his own literary brilliance:

I have now before me part of a *Play* written by *your son* which for stile & greatness of thought is equal to one of Shakspeare's ... I have frequently asked where he can get such thoughts, all the answer he makes is this "I

borrow them from nature" ... If your *son* is not a second Shakspeare I am not a *man*.<sup>35</sup>

Ireland represents himself here in the same terms that underpinned the conception of Shakespeare amongst other eighteenth century writers: Samuel Johnson calls him 'the poet of nature', and John Dryden asserts that 'All the images of nature were still present to him ... he looked inwards and found her there'.<sup>36</sup> Simultaneously, he imagines himself a neglected genius in Chatterton's line, hinting at the expectation of an early death in another letter: 'O Mr. I.---- pray you look upon yourself, happy in having a son who *if he lives* must make futurity amazing'.<sup>37</sup> For Schoenbaum, Mr. H. became 'the outlet for all [Ireland's] megalomaniac fantasies'; but there is more to be gleaned from Ireland's sportive letters to an all-too-credulous father.<sup>38</sup> 'If your *son* is not a second Shakspeare I am not a *man*': Mr H. was of course not a real man at all, and the persistence with which the correspondent exclaims that Samuel's son was able to imitate Shakespeare indicates an implicit desire for recognition. Indeed, with praise 'lavished on his creations while his own abilities were brushed aside', Ireland may have himself desired exposure as their author to an extent not previously suggested.<sup>39</sup>

Edmund Malone exposed Ireland's forgeries 'swiftly and devastatingly';<sup>40</sup> but his denunciation in turn precipitated Ireland's assertion of authorial independence. Malone's *Inquiry* of 1796 takes as its guiding principle that Shakespeare's fame and writings must be preserved 'pure and unpolluted by any modern sophistication or foreign admixture whatsoever'.<sup>41</sup> Thus for his complete edition of Shakespeare he drew on documentary evidence from various archives to establish and expand the author's biography, and used early quartos and folios 'more thoroughly than any scholar before him' in establishing authoritative play texts.<sup>42</sup> Ireland's forgeries had fabricated both

<sup>35</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p.153, quoting 'Letter from "Mr. H." to S. Ireland', BL MS. Add. 30346, ff.54-5.

<sup>36</sup> *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (Oxford University Press, 1908), p.11;

*Dryden's Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, ed. D. Nichol Smith (London: Blackie, 1900), p.51.

<sup>37</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p.156. My italics.

<sup>38</sup> Schoenbaum, *Lives*, p.209.

<sup>39</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, p.152.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony G. Petti, *English Literary Hands from Chaucer to Dryden* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.89.

<sup>41</sup> Edmond Malone, *An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments* (London: Baldwin, 1796), p.2-3.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Martin, 'Malone, Edmond (1741-1812)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn. (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p.208

<sup>32</sup> For instance, Chatterton is eulogised in Shelley's *Adonais*, Coleridge's 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' and Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence'. By the time of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Five English Poets', 'noble Chatterton' is even compared to Shakespeare: 'With Shakspeare's manhood at a boy's wild heart, --- / Through Hamlet's doubt to Shakspeare near allied' (*Poems*, ed. Oswald Doughty [London: Dent, 1957]).

<sup>33</sup> W.H. Ireland, *Neglected Genius* (London: Wilson, 1812)

<sup>34</sup> Ireland, *Authentic Account*, p.21.

biographical documents and authorial texts, and as such ‘undermined the textual Authorities he had so carefully marshalled’.<sup>43</sup> Anthony Grafton argues that historical criticism ‘has been dependent for its development on the stimulus that forgers have provided’.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, the *Inquiry* provided Malone with an opportunity to showcase new palaeographical and critical techniques, and even print a hitherto unpublished Shakespeare signature, but the relationship between forgery and authority can be seen as symbiotic:

Only when authorial property was recognised could it be infringed; only when authenticity resided in documents could it be “forged” ... the tracing of forgery back to its author could by now be decriminalised, celebrated even, as a means to proving individual creative genius in exactly the way that Walpole had feared in the case of Chatterton.<sup>45</sup>

And drawing on the same impetus by which Shakespeare attained idolatry, Ireland himself went so far as to ‘claim authorial rights in a “forgery” of England’s greatest author’.<sup>46</sup> Samuel Ireland’s preoccupation with ‘controverting the positions of [Malone]’ with ‘minute researches’ dominated his 153-page *Inquiry*, glossing over his son’s precursory *Authentic Account*, itself a document illustrative of the forger’s desire for authorial revelation: ‘He wrote his confession – itself a highly literary thing to do – very soon after Malone’s exposure’.<sup>47</sup> And in this eagerly published work the younger Ireland definitively establishes his authorship of the forgeries: ‘I am myself both the author and writer’.<sup>48</sup> Malone’s ‘tedious epistle’ bothers him only slightly, and only then because ‘the *forgery*, he says is weak’; his critic’s weighty tome is dismissed in a single paragraph.<sup>49</sup> Ireland is more concerned with recounting the reception of *Vortigern* as ‘the work of the greatest of men’ and illustrating the promise of his *Henry II*, ‘thought by many superior to *Vortigern*’.<sup>50</sup> Indeed the underlying premise of the *Authentic Account*, passed over by most commentators, is a desire to introduce a literary career. Towards the end of the work he prints a speech from his play *William the Conqueror*, ‘leaving

the world to judge of its merits if it possesses any’,<sup>51</sup> and concludes the work by urging the public to respond to his next play without prejudice: ‘Should I attempt another play’.<sup>52</sup> By the time of his *Confessions* he would speak of himself as the ‘literary character’ that the *Authentic Account* anticipates.<sup>53</sup>

The establishment of his ‘literary character’ became, then, the culmination of the forgeries for Ireland. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this character continues to appropriate from other authors, and Shakespeare’s influence remains particularly unshakeable. In the preface to his first literary work, *The Abbess*, he expresses his reaction to overhearing the ‘accidental union’ of two words, ‘the *author* of those *papers*’, and recounts the alleged conversation that provoked his progression from forgery to novel-writing.<sup>54</sup> The front cover presents him as ‘W.H. Ireland, the avowed author of the Shakspear Papers’, and even includes a Shakespearean epigraph:

Let modest Matrons at thy mention start,  
And blushing Virgins, when they read our  
annals,  
Skip o’er the guilty page.

Ireland was not, it seems, completely past misrepresenting Shakespeare: these are lines from Dryden’s 1679 extensive revision of *Troilus and Cressida*, the appropriately-titled *Truth Found Too Late*. As with Ireland’s earlier forgeries, Dryden’s version constitutes ‘a highly conscious attempt to recast an Elizabethan text in conformity with the dramatic taste of another age’.<sup>55</sup> In *Ballads in Imitation of the Antient*, Ireland’s predilection for writing in other personas continues, producing a poem addressed to Queen Elizabeth ‘In imitation of Spenser’ and in *Neglected Genius*, he writes in the guises of Spenser, Milton and Butler, as well as Chatterton.<sup>56</sup> And the works and life of Shakespeare also resurface: he composed his own ‘Ballad Of the Death of Hotspur Percy’ for instance, and the rural atmosphere of ‘Willy, The Forsaken Swain’ perhaps takes inspiration from his visit to Stratford. In this latter poem, the speaker dispenses pseudo-Shakespearean advice to the appropriately named eponymous character: ‘But,

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Bate, ‘Faking it: Shakespeare and the 1790s’, in N. Smith (ed.) *Essays and studies 1993: literature and censorship* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), p.70.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, (London: Collins, 1990), p.123.

<sup>45</sup> Baines, *House of Forgery*, p.183.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.184.

<sup>47</sup> Bate, ‘Faking it’, p.69.

<sup>48</sup> Ireland, *Misc. Papers*, p.42.

<sup>49</sup> Ireland, *Authentic Account*, p.26.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.25-6.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p.38.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p.43.

<sup>53</sup> Ireland, *Confessions*, A2<sup>v</sup>

<sup>54</sup> W.H. Ireland, *The Abbess*, 4 vols. (London: Earle and Hemet, 1799) I.v-xii.

<sup>55</sup> W.W. Bernhardt, ‘Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* and Dryden’s *Truth Found too Late*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 20 (1969), pp.129-141 (p.130).

<sup>56</sup> W.H. Ireland, *Ballads in Imitation of the Antient* (London: Longman & Rees, 1801); Ireland, *Neglected Genius*.

silly young swain! hadst thou known / The frailty of all womankind'.<sup>57</sup>

William Henry Ireland's identity is by its very nature deceptive: until Mair's 1938 biography, for instance, commentators as eminent as Sidney Lee accepted his claim that he was born in 1777 rather than 1775.<sup>58</sup> Ireland made a career of writing fiction in personas other than his own, from his appropriation of Shakespeare to the numerous pseudonyms assumed in his later literary career. Grebanier gathers extensive and convincing evidence that Ireland was of doubtful parentage, and the uncertainties Ireland felt concerning his own identity are poignantly expressed in the undoubtedly autobiographical trilogy of 'Bastard' poems in his *Rhapsodies*.<sup>59</sup> In response to the suicidal dejection of the 'The Bastard's Complaint', the concluding poem asks 'Why should the Bastard rail his hapless fate?' (l.1). In lines reminiscent of Edmund's 'I grow, I prosper: / Now gods, stand up for bastards!',<sup>60</sup> Ireland's illegitimacy acts as a spur for ambition:

Be such thy lot, and with it rest content;  
'Tis Heav'n decrees it – God Omnipotent.  
Thou hast no fetter to enchain the soul,  
'Tis godlike will each action must control ...  
Arouse the dormant feelings of thy breast,  
In every action stand thyself confess'd. (ll.11-18)

The affinity cannot be coincidental: Ireland had rewritten *King Lear* in manuscript form and, after all, Edmund is a forger: 'if this letter speed / And my invention thrive, Edmund the base / Shall top the legitimate'.<sup>61</sup> Obliging his father with letters supposedly from Shakespeare's hand, alongside poems and legal documents, Ireland's invention did indeed prosper. Prompted by his success, he wrote himself into an anachronistic Shakespeare biography and used forgery as an outlet for his own creative ambition. His subsequent literary career may have been, as Schoenbaum dismisses it, an 'anticlimax', but for Ireland the forgeries *were* literature, their success proving him a capable writer.<sup>62</sup> And the bard remained inseparable from his creative output up to his death: in his last published verse work he speaks

<sup>57</sup> W.H. Ireland, *Rhapsodies* (London: Shury, 1803), ll.21-2

<sup>58</sup> This date allows him to claim that he was 'considerably under the age of eighteen' when he composed Vortigern, the same age at which Chatterton's career was terminated. 'Here is another lie' reads a marginal note in Malone's copy of the *Confessions*, establishing Ireland's actual age as twenty (Ireland, *Confessions*, p.135).

<sup>59</sup> Grebanier, *Forgery*, pp. 53-57.

<sup>60</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Arden, 2004), 1.2.21-2.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 1.2.19-21.

<sup>62</sup> Schoenbaum, *Lives*, p.233.

of 'inimitable Shakespeare'.<sup>63</sup> And in successfully imitating the inimitable, however fleetingly and inadequately, delusions of authorial grandeur turned Ireland from forger to author.

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