
Literary Forgery and the Construction of Meaning in the Publishing Process

Magdaleen Snyman

Abstract

Literary forgery has been a controversial topic throughout history and affects the discipline of book history on various levels. Literary forgeries are often discredited and discarded simply because of the deceit in their origin, however these texts contain many clues about the history of publishing. Forgeries beg the question of whether an author's identity is linked to the meaning of a text and gives researchers the opportunity to identify where authority and power lies in the publishing process at a specific time in history. This article will use Robert Darnton's communication cycle as a basis to describe the publishing process of a text and the various role-players involved. By examining two cases of literary forgery, the role-players in the publishing cycle and their impact on the reception of the text by the reader will be highlighted. By examining reader-response theories the article will attempt to show how meaning is constructed through a dynamic process and examines how this process occurs in the case of literary forgery. This article will also show the complexities of "authenticity" of meaning to showcase why forgeries are treated in specific ways at specific points in history. In conclusion the article will attempt to show why forgery was deemed necessary by the authors in the two cases described and prove that book historians should see these texts as valuable artefacts, worthy of study.

Key Words

Literary Forgery, Communication Circuit, Authenticity, Construction of Meaning, Reader Response, Authorial intent

Introduction

It is not always the case that forgery marks a published text as something that should be regarded as false, inauthentic, dishonest or without any intrinsic value whatsoever except, perhaps, when regarded as an example to prove a point in some legal, moral or historical analysis of sorts. For the purposes of this article a literary forgery can be defined as; a text that is deliberately attributed to someone other than its true author. If one takes Robert Darnton's theory of the history of books into consideration, a study of what is regarded as forgery in the publishing of literature uncovers the unsettling dynamics in the localization of the production of meaning in the circuit of the publishing of a text. Debates about the meaning of a text usually favour one of two elements in the publishing (or communication) circuit: the meaning of the text is solely or largely determined by authorial intentions, or, especially when the author of a text is not clearly identifiable, the meaning of the text is determined by the readers (whoever they may be, but they are usually taken to be the readers of an accessible text in a more or less public domain). Darnton also draws our attention to the fact that the publishing circuit, which is essential to the process of creating the meaning of a published text, is influenced by socio-economic factors at every level.

Forgery and the communication/publishing circuit

Robert Darnton's communications circuit provides an important starting point for the study of the transmission of texts and needs to be taken into account when examining literary forgeries. At the centre of the circuit we see three overlapping influences on all parties involved in the production, distribution and acquisition of a text: Intellectual influences and

Publicity, Economic and Social Conjuncture and Political and Legal Sanctions (Darnton 2006:11-22). The publishing circuit takes place in an interconnected environment where social, economic and historical factors are always at play. These societal influences play a very important role when examining literary forgeries as they are what influence decisions made by the various parties involved in the circuit. An author decides to produce a forgery for various reasons be they political and social (in the case of *Down the Road, Worlds Away*, published in 1987) or economic (in the case of the Rowley manuscripts published in the 1700's). In both cases examined in this article the publishers were made to believe that the author of a specific text is someone other than the actual person who created the text. The author did not simply write under a pseudonym but in fact adopted a different persona and convinced the publisher that the work was an original or authentic account in a way that it was not. In the case of the Rowley manuscripts a young boy tried to pass off homemade manuscripts as the fifteenth century writings of a monk while in *Down the Road, Worlds Away* a feminist publisher was led to believe a collection of short stories was written by an Asian woman of colour dealing with issues surrounding young girls when in fact, it was written by a white, English priest. These texts, that appeared 200 years apart, serve to highlight the fact that literary forgery is treated differently at different times in history.

Darnton's communication circuit "ends" with the reader (before beginning again) and when it comes to literary forgery one of the most pressing questions is: what is the effect of literary forgery on the reader? The author intends a certain reader to read his/her text and in order to reach this reader they feel the need to produce a forgery. For the author, forgery is necessary to give the text authenticity. By examining the way readers interact with texts,

it is possible to deduce how the author's intentions as well as the paratext of any literary work influence a reader's perception (Darnton 2006: 11-22).

Thomas Rowley Manuscripts- forgeries by Thomas Chatterton

In 1768, 15-year-old Thomas Chatterton constructed the persona of Thomas Rowley, an imaginary monk, and wrote poems to sell as authentic fifteenth century manuscripts. He had been able to imitate the design and feel of these manuscripts after being exposed to the real thing in a church close to his home. Chatterton hoped that by selling the Rowley manuscripts he would be able to save himself and his mother from poverty. Chatterton started to look for a wealthy patron and met William Barrett, George Catcott and Henry Burgum in his hometown of Bristol. Barrett relied heavily on the forgeries supplied by Chatterton in writing *Histories and Antiquities of Bristol* in 1789 but Chatterton decided to try to find another patron who would pay him more for his "discoveries". In 1769 Chatterton presented some Rowley poetry and *The Ryse of Peyncteyge yn Englade* to the fourth Earl of Orford, Horace Walpole, who had written *The Castle of Otranto* under the name "Onuphrio Muralto" and given it a false imprint of "Naples 1529". At first Walpole was willing to help Chatterton publish the works but when he found out Chatterton was only sixteen years old he indicated that he did not think the work presented was authentic and refused to print them. Chatterton was not pleased and in turn accused Walpole of also being a forger (Ruthven 2001: 5-20, 106-140).

Chatterton committed suicide in 1770 ironically only a few days before Dr Thomas Fry came to London intending to financially support the teenager whether he was the "discoverer or

author merely” of the poems. Even after his death, Chatterton was mostly regarded as the transcriber of the Rowley manuscripts and not the actual author. The real controversy surrounding the forgeries only began after Chatterton’s death.

In 1777 *Poems supposed to have been written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley and others*, in the fifteenth century, was edited by Thomas Tyrwhitt who believed the Rowley manuscripts to be genuine. However, only a year later the appendix of the next edition states that the Rowley manuscripts may be authored by Chatterton himself. In 1782, the *History of English Poetry* (three volumes compiled and printed by Thomas Warton) included Rowley under fifteenth century poetry but again questioned the authenticity of these works in a second edition. It is interesting to note that even though these poems had questionable origins, publishers still decided to print them. Where the case is usually that the publisher will not take the chance of damaging their credibility, it seems that, for Chatterton they were willing to do the opposite (Phillips 2012: 23-47).

Literary theorist Gérard Genette argues the importance of seeing texts in their wider social context in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. For Genette, paratext refers to the elements at the beginning of a text that help to control how the text is perceived by its readers. The paratext consists of two parts; the peritext and the epitext. The peritext includes things that are “inside” the text; chapter titles, prefaces, captions, illustrations and dedications. The epitext consists of elements outside the text like interviews, marketing, book reviews and other information that is communicated about the text. Genette distinguishes further by describing paratexts as authographic or allographic. An

authographic paratext is paratext that the author wrote or intended for the reader to see while allographic paratext is created by someone other than the author of the text (e.g. editors, publishers etc.) (Genette 1997: 16-32).

The epitext of Chatterton's Rowley poems give book historians an idea of how forged texts were received publicly in the 18th century. From newspaper clippings it can be deduced that Chatterton's works were regarded with an amount of admiration and that the text still had commercial value even if its historic value had been discredited. In a 1777 daily newspaper, *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, an advertisement asking for assistance in publishing Chatterton's works shortly after his death calls Chatterton an "ingenious young man":

Thomas Chatterton's Works. Many of the Poems and Essays of the above author having been put into my hands for publication, should be extremely obliged to any gentleman who may have any of the productions of this ingenious young man in his profession, if he would communicate them to the Publisher...who will treat them with every mark of attention that may render them worthy the acceptance of the Public. (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* 1777: 'Classifieds')

An advertisement placed 5 years later in the same newspaper shows that Chatterton's works are still in circulation and that even though they have been proved to be forged they are still objects of value that can be sold:

[For sale] Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and Others, in an added Appendix, containing some Observations upon the Language of these Poems, tending to prove, that they were, not by any ancient Author, but

entirely by Thomas Chatterton (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser 1782: 'Classifieds')

The same year, an advertisement in the Public Advertiser shows that Chatterton is still a topic of interest and asks the public for any information about, or works by, the author as his life is to be written about in the *Biographia Britannica* (a publication that strived to document the lives of the most important men and women in 18th century Britain):

By desire of his friend, Dr Kippis, the writer of this is to supply the Biographia Britannica with the life of Thomas Chatterton; who, whether the real Rowley or not, was certainly an extraordinary being. (Public Advertiser 1782)

The author goes on to ask for information pertaining to the life of Chatterton, especially regarding what books Chatterton would have had access to in Bristol. This shows that Chatterton's forgeries are in such high regard that the writer is interested in trying to determine what influenced the author.

Chatterton's forgeries are discussed in a variety of works published after his death and the consensus seems to be that he was successful in convincing some readers of the authenticity of the Rowley manuscripts because of difficulties in studying early English. However, shortly after doubt was cast on the authenticity of the works by various investors the teenager approached, the fact that someone was able to create versions so close to ancient manuscripts is praised rather than being seen as a criminal act. In the case of this text it also becomes apparent that elements of production can contribute to meaning. The original Chatterton manuscripts that were in William Barrett's possession were left to the

British Museum by his family in 1800 and Chatterton has become an icon for various authors and poets. He is commemorated by Wordsworth in *Resolution and Independence*, by Coleridge in *Monody of the Death of Chatterton* and in Keats's sonnet *To Chatterton* to name but a few (Phillips 2012: 23-47).

Chatterton's life as a forger is also examined by Peter Ackroyd in his 1988 novel *Chatterton*. Ackroyd focusses on Chatterton as a hero of the Romantics and demonstrates how a poet disappears into his text and how the text can live on even if the poet does not. For Ackroyd texts are not the inventions of the author; they are simply rearrangements of other texts. Ackroyd does not favour historical truth over imagined truth, an argument that could support the Romantic notion that Chatterton was in fact a neglected genius and that his forgeries should be regarded as works of art (Ackroyd 1988).

While Thomas Chatterton is seen as a literary genius who was simply trying to survive economically and in doing so created great works of art, approximately 200 years later the same cannot be said of another forger named Toby Forward.

***Down the Road, Worlds Away* by Rahila Kahn- a forgery by Toby Forward**

In 1987 Virago Press, a well-known British feminist publisher printed a collection of short stories by an Asian woman called Rahila Kahn. *Down the Road, Worlds Away* was aimed at the teenage market and contained stories about Asian immigrants' daughters growing up in Britain and having to deal with social issues at English schools that were located 'down the road' but were 'worlds away' from their Muslim culture and heritage. Three weeks after the book was published Virago learned that its true author was a white male, born in England,

named Toby Forward. Forward was a priest in Brighton at the time and decided to write *Down the Road, Worlds Away* after witnessing the difficulties English children had in understanding the culture of their Asian schoolmates. He adopted the persona Rahila Kahn because he was sceptical about being published if Virago knew who he really was. Embarrassed that they had been misled, Virago withdrew the book from the market.

During the process of approval by the publisher, Virago wrote to Kahn asking her why she had not written all her short stories in the first-person, they assumed her “sense of ‘otherness’ was still so great” that she found it difficult to write in this way; a testament to how believable Forward’s text seemed. As second-wave feminism reached its peak the market for stories like *Daughters of the Prophet* (a first-person account of a woman that was part of an ethnic minority in Britain) in *Down the Road, Worlds Away* grew and Forward provided broadcasters at the BBC and publishers like Virago and The Woman’s Press with exactly the kind of author they were looking for (Ruthven 2001: 24-28).

Once exposed, Forward’s forgery was seen as a disgrace because it involved gender politics. By pretending to be Rahila Kahn, Forward took on the identity of another and wrote about the sensitive issues of race and gender. After the forgery came to light The Woman’s Press commented that “it is incredible how some men feel compelled to invade women’s space” while Virago stated they were “distressed that this attempt to represent the Asian community should transpire to be a cruel hoax” (Nettell 1987).

It can be argued that since Rahila Kahn was never a real person, Virago could have simply accepted this as a pseudonym for one of their authors and kept on promoting the text as a

feminist work. However, their reputation was at stake because of the way they had wanted readers to perceive the novel. By examining the paratext of *Down the Road, Worlds Away* it becomes clear why Virago Press felt the need to withdraw this forgery from the market.

In *Down the Road, Worlds Away* the allographic paratext is very important in influencing the way the text is perceived. The cover of the novel depicts a drawing of an Asian girl and a white boy, standing in front of a window. The pastel colours and ethnic patterns of the cover clearly position it as a text for and about young girls, negotiating relationships, race and gender. This is also clear from the fact that it is printed under the imprint Upstarts, explained on the second page after opening the novel:

Virago Upstarts is a new series of books for girls and young women. Upstarts are about love and romance, family and friends, work and school-and about preoccupations- because in the last two decades the lives and expectations of girls have changed a lot... (Kahn 1987)

The publisher's peritext on the very first page of the novel also tries to emphasise the importance of Rahila Kahn's voice and her knowledge about the issues young Asian girls may face in Britain by giving some biographical information about her. By including the fact that she has two daughters the reader may assume that she has more knowledge on the subject than the actual author, an English priest who does not have children, would:

Rahila Kahn was born in Coventry in 1950. She has also lived in Birmingham, Derby, Oxford, London, Peterborough and Brighton. In 1971 she married and now has two daughters. It was not until 1986 that she began writing... (Kahn 1987)

In this case it is clear that social factors determined the judgement of Forward as a forger. Being a priest and having previously taught young children, Forward may have felt qualified as an author to write about the topics presented in the book. From the author's perspective, his race and gender did not disqualify him to write about these issues. However, the feminist stance of the publisher disqualifies Forward's account as inauthentic. Clearly the consequences of this work being proved a forgery would damage the publisher's credibility among a public who viewed them as disseminators of texts written by women for women. This case highlights the interconnectedness of the environment in which the publishing circuit takes place. It also showcases the complex dimensions of meaning in a literary work and how meaning is influenced by not only the author and reader but also the publisher of a text.

Why was Forward seen as a liar and fake but Chatterton was pitied and in some cases even praised? To answer this question Darnton's notion of the history of books as being at its core an interdisciplinary field is extremely important. Historically it becomes quite clear why Chatterton would not have had to suffer the same humiliation as Forward because of the time in which he lived. During the 18th century it was common for artists to begin their careers as apprentices, trying their best to imitate their master's work. The fact that the Romantics praised Chatterton supports the theory that he was challenging social or established systems of order- a deed that can be regarded as heroic. Furthermore, Chatterton's intentions in producing a forgery are also easier to defend than Forward's. A starving teenager hoping to be able to care for himself and his mother is sympathised with while a man trying to adopt the persona of a marginalised woman, however noble his

intentions were, is seen as a deceiver of the public. In Darnton's communication/publishing circuit, the judgement passed on both authors occurred at different points. In Chatterton's case it was the Readers and public who ultimately passed judgement, while in Forward's case it was the Publisher. This shows that every element in the circuit can be an important authority in the creation of meaning and the history of any text (Darnton 2006: 9-22).

But what effect does literary forgery have on the reader? If Post-Modernist theorists are to be believed the author is of little importance. When examining literary forgery one must consider not only the effect on the author or publisher (which mainly involves damage to their reputation and financial loss) but also how the reader interacts with a text to produce meaning.

The Reader's response and Post-Modernist theory

Forgery, especially in Forward's case, complicates the idea of authenticity. Can a text be authentic if its author is not? For French theorist Roland Barthes the idea that a literary work can be critiqued mainly by taking the author's identity into account is false. For Barthes, using the author's personal experiences, environment, religion or psychology to find meaning in their work is a flawed way of analysis. This is because, by assigning the identity of the author to the text, critics are imposing limits on its meaning. According to Barthes the text does not refer back to the author. Its symbolic language and codes open it up to multiple interpretations.

Separating a literary work from its author allows the text to be interpreted in a wider variety of ways depending on the codes present in the text. In the case of Thomas Chatterton, this

may have serious consequences for writing history but in the case of Forward, Barthes' argument can easily be applied as a defence. If the readers of *Down the Road, Worlds Away* are allowed to construct their own meaning from the text, separating it not only from Toby Forward but even Rahila Kahn then it does not matter who wrote it. Barthes argues that the original intent of the author cannot be detected and that readers must not become preoccupied with trying to do this. Instead, literary works should be seen as multi-layered constructions that have a variety of meanings instead of one "ultimate" or "true" meaning to be found. This theory becomes problematic for a feminist publisher like Virago Press, as they rely heavily on authorial intent and identity in their decision to publish a text (Burke 1998).

In finding a compromise between theories that state that meaning is derived subjectively and theories arguing the importance of the author's intent (linked to his/her identity) Wolfgang Iser takes into account the first element in Darnton's communication cycle, the Author and the last element, the Reader. Iser points out that the study of a literary work should not only focus on what the author's intention was but also how the text is responded to by its readers. Iser does not deny that authorial intent is important but states that the meaning of a literary work can be found somewhere between what is intended by the author and what is perceived by the reader.

When looking at the way readers interact with texts, Iser points out that a text should be seen as "schematized aspects" that help the reader to produce the meaning of the text. A text does not simply pass in front of the reader's eyes- it presents the reader with

components rather than a whole. The components of the text set in motion the process for the reader out of which meaning is constructed. The reader interacts with the text. Iser argues that a text has two poles: the artistic (the author's text) and the aesthetic (the realization of the reader) and therefore the author's text is not identical to the text the reader perceives. For Iser, the actualisation of the text lies somewhere between the artistic and the aesthetic. The text becomes dynamic as the reader uses the perspectives presented in the text and relates them to his/her views. This means that the text is the result of the reader's interaction with what the author wrote (Iser 2011: 80-91).

Reading differs from face-to-face communication because the text does not adapt to its reader. The reader cannot ask the text questions to prove that they understand it the way the author intended. Iser argues that because of the lack of a shared frame of reference a text allows for an increased variety in communication to take place. However, the reader's activity is still controlled by the text because it is written deliberately and intended to illicit certain responses:

Communication in literature...is a process set in motion and regulated...by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit... (Iser 2011: 80-91)

This means that readers do not simply derive meaning from what they read but also from "what is not said" by the text as the reader's imagination will fill the gaps (Iser 2011: 80-91).

When we look at how readers interact with a text it is important to consider what Iser calls the "textual segments" that are presented for reading. At its most basic, this refers to the

story. Stories are structured in specific ways, the author may decide to end chapters or insert breaks between paragraphs. Some characters may be focussed on in detail while others are not. The reader takes these segments and puts them together in his/her mind while filling in any gaps to make sense of what they have been presented with. When relating this to Darnton's theory it becomes clear that the segments presented by the author are shaped and "edited" through a process before the reader is allowed to interact with them. Decisions made at every level of the circuit by the various role-players may in the end affect the reader's response.

Iser further argues that the meaning of the text is a combination of four main perspectives; of the narrator, the characters, the plot and the reader. These perspectives vary in importance and none of them are exactly the same as the meaning of the text. Looking at this argument for the process of reading it becomes clear that readers do not simply absorb what they are presented with. Readers participate in the creation of meaning in a text (Iser 2011: 80-91).

As much as this theory emphasises the importance of the reader in the creation of meaning it also states that authorial intent plays a role. The "segments" Chatterton and Forward present their readers with will have an effect on the meaning derived from their works. It can be argued then that the publisher's role is to ensure that the reader is presented with authentic "segments" instead of a forged text.

Conclusion

Literary forgery, then, is the wilful attempt, by the author of a text, to control the meaning of that text depending on a specific role player in the publishing/communication circuit. For Forward, the text needed Virago Press as its publisher to be authentic while for Chatterton, the manuscripts needed Thomas Rowley as their author. For the study of the history of books, we can therefore not regard literary forgeries as false, inauthentic, dishonest or without any intrinsic value as they present us with important knowledge about the changing world of Publishing and the various socio-economic factors at play throughout the processes of production, distribution and acquisition of any text. Literary forgeries highlight where power is located in Darton's communication circuit at specific times in history and emphasise the dynamic nature of the construction of meaning in a text.

References

Ackroyd, Peter. 1988. *Chatterton*. New York: Grove Press.

Burke, Seán. 1998. *The Death And Return Of The Author*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Darnton, Robert. 2006. 'What Is The History Of Books?'. In *The Book History Reader*, 2nd ed., 9-22. New York: Routledge.

Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser (London, England),. 1777. 'Classifieds'.

Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser (London, England),. 1782. 'Classifieds'.

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Iser, Wolfgang. 2011. 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach'. In *The History Of Reading*, 1st ed., 80-91. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kahn, R. *Down the Road, Worlds Away*. Virago Press, 1987

Nettell, Stephanie. 1987. 'Sex Scandal'. *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Phillips, Ivan. 2012. 'A Clash Of Harmony: Forgery As Politics In The Work Of Thomas Chatterton'. *Critical Survey* 24 (3): 23-47. doi:10.3167/cs.2012.240302.

Public Advertiser (London, England),. 1782. 'Classifieds'.

Ruthven, K. K. 2001. *Faking Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.