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Oscar Wilde: Orality, Literary Property, and Crimes of Writing

PAUL K. SAINT-AMOUR

I appropriate what is already mine, for once a thing
is published it becomes public property.

—Oscar Wilde

WHILE the eighteenth century was the birth-century of copyright law in England, the nineteenth century saw its coming-of-age, witnessing the law's enshrinement, consolidation, and extension. Between 1800 and 1842 the term of copyright protection had increased from fourteen to forty-two years (or the author's life plus seven years), and by 1900 the law had expanded in scope to include musical performances, paintings, drawings, and photographs. Though a bid to make copyright perpetual failed early in the century, so too did a later attempt, during the Royal Commission on Copyright of 1875–78, to replace copyright with a royalty system.¹ The existing law, which gave the holder a monopoly on the reproduction, distribution, and sale of the protected creation, had endured a period of radical free-trade re-

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¹ For pathbreaking studies of the relation between literary value and the economics and metaphysics of copyright law, see Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993); and Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia

form to become an indispensable and expansible prop to culture making. Reflecting on the Royal Commission hearings, in which he had appeared as a witness, Matthew Arnold even imagined conferring intellectual property rights in conversation, to ratify the talker's "instinct of ownership in his good sayings":

There is no property, people often say, in ideas uttered in conversation, in spoken words; and it is inferred that there ought to be no property in ideas and words when they are embodied in a book. But why is there no property in ideas uttered in conversation, and in spoken words, while there is property in ideas and words when they come in a book? A brilliant talker may very well have the instinct of ownership in his good sayings, and all the more if he must and can only talk them and not write them. He might be glad of power to prevent the appropriation of them by other people, to fix the conditions on which alone the appropriation should be allowed, and to derive profit from allowing it.²

Although Arnold went on to discount the viability of conversational copyright, he gestured toward a pragmatic rather than a conceptual obstacle: tracking spoken ideas and words in order to secure the speaker's profits presented a simply "insuperable difficulty." That Arnold could entertain the notion of conversational copyright at all tells us something about the expansionist energies of late-nineteenth-century copyright law, a canon that Arnold deemed a mark of "delicacy" and implicitly a *sine qua non* of a civilized people. That he found talk insuperably difficult to track tells us something about oral patterns of circulation, which present an inherent resistance to intellectual property forms reliant on sole and serial ownership and the commodification of expression.

Oscar Wilde stood at this vexed late-Victorian border between literary commodity and oral proliferation, between copy-

Univ. Press, 1994). For recent discussions of the 1875–78 Royal Commission on Copyright, see N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1993); and John Feather, *Publishing, Piracy and Politics: An Historical Study of Copyright in Britain* (London: Mansell, 1994).

² Matthew Arnold, "Copyright," in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 9 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 120.

right and conversation. As a writer more famed for his talk, Wilde left many contemporaries who felt, with Robert Ross, that Wilde's "personality and conversation were far more wonderful than anything he wrote, so that his written works give only a pale reflection of his power."³ Nonetheless, Wilde clearly profited from intellectual property law, and could be chary of collecting his writerly debts: his deathbed letters chiefly concerned royalties owed to him for *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry*, a play whose scenario he had sold to its writer, Frank Harris. Yet the financially straitened Wilde had also sold options on the same scenario to at least five other unknowing parties, flouting the very notion of serial and exclusive property in ideas even as he profited by it.⁴ And this was not Wilde's only breach of the conventions of literary property. Over the course of his literary career he was repeatedly charged with plagiarism, and in at least one case he clearly practiced it: his 1886 Chatterton lecture, the bulk of which he purloined from two other writers. In 1893 he boasted to Max Beerbohm: "Of course I plagiarise. It is the privilege of the appreciative man. I never read Flaubert's *Tentation de St Antoine* without signing my name at the end of it. *Que voulez-vous?* All the Best Hundred Books bear my signature in this manner."⁵ Wilde's rhetorical and practical disregard for private literary property has led Merlin Holland to posit, with perhaps equal parts reverence and discomfort, a Wildean "communism of language and ideas," a kind of intellectual collectivism that stands in stark opposition to the logic of copyright, with its incentive of individual monopoly.⁶

At least in part, this collectivism was a corollary of Wilde's professed socialism—his contention, as he put it in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), that "Socialism, . . . by con-

³ Robert Ross, 23 December 1900 letter to Adela Schuster, in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 862.

⁴ See Wilde's letters to Frank Harris of September–November 1900, in *Letters*, pp. 835–44; see also H. Montgomery Hyde's introduction to Frank Harris, *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Richards Press, 1956).

⁵ Wilde, quoted in Max Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 36.

⁶ See Merlin Holland, "Plagiarist, Or Pioneer?" in *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*, ed. C. George Sandulescu (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994), p. 208.

verting private property into public wealth, and substituting cooperation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community."⁷ Recently a number of scholars have begun to see Wilde's Irish cultural inheritance as crucially informing both his socialism and his plagiarism. As an Irishman, Wilde was raised in what Deirdre Toomey calls "the most oral culture in Western Europe, a culture which retained primary orality as well as oral/writing *diglossia* well into the twentieth century."⁸

Such a formulation may tread near a kind of essentialism: not all Irish are great talkers, nor, certainly, are all great talkers Irish. But whether or not one regards Wilde's orality as specifically and authentically Irish, he spent his youth steeped in fabulous talk. The genteel intellectual circles in which Wilde's family moved were coterie of spectacular conversation, the most celebrated talker in the room often being Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Wilde, whose pen name was Speranza. Of course, Speranza's Merrion Square salons were hardly the domain of "primary orality," an orality to which all writing is alien. But Wilde also encountered varieties of primary orality through his father, whom he accompanied on archaeological and folklore-gathering expeditions in rural Ireland. There he also learned of the problems of the oral/written interface, for his father, William Wilde, was not only an avid collector of Irish folklore but also one acquainted with the potential damage wrought by his own undertaking: while publishing the stories, cures, and charms of nonliterate communities might preserve them for posterity, it also did a violence to the conditions of oral transmission that were among the defining characteristics of those communities.⁹ Those conditions included plurality (the prolif-

⁷ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *Fortnightly Review*, n.s. 49 (1891), 293.

⁸ "The Story-Teller at Fault," in *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*, p. 406. See also Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994); and Declan Kiberd, "Oscar Wilde: The Artist as Irishman," and Owen Dudley Edwards, "Impressions of an Irish Sphinx," in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 9–23 and 47–70.

⁹ Two years before Oscar's birth, William Wilde had published a volume of *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) gathered mostly from nonliterate rural patients; after William's

eration of variant tales without a single “official version”), mutability (tailoring retellings to suit the audience), and a kind of communal ownership in which information could circulate and proliferate unfettered by private literary property forms. Transcription and publication not only calcified a plural, mutable narrative into a single telling, they also brought under the rubric of private accumulation (the sole authorship and copyright of Sir William Robert Wills Wilde) material whose value had originally dwelt in its circulation and in its status as the property of a community. Through his parents’ Dublin salon life and their folkloric interests, Oscar Wilde observed not only the wonders of talk circulated and dispersed but also the losses incurred when talk was annexed, set down, owned, and sold.

To learn about orality from within literacy is also to learn a certain discourse about orality, that discourse by which literate culture imagines *primary* orality as also *prior*—as the egg or Eden of spontaneity, collectivity, and authenticity from which literate culture has emerged or fallen. Such a discourse informs some of Wilde’s remarks about orality; in “The True Function and Value of Criticism” (1890) he has Gilbert say: “When Milton became blind he composed, as everyone should compose, with the voice purely, and so the pipe or reed of earlier days became that mighty many-stopped organ whose rich reverberant music has all the stateliness of Homeric verse. . . . Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice. . . . As it now is, we cannot do so.”¹⁰ Yet for all his paeans to Homeric verse, Wilde also knew that oral epic is hardly a space of con-

death, his wife Speranza edited and published two additional volumes of lore her husband had collected in *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland, with Sketches of the Irish Past* (1887) and *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland: Contributions to Irish Lore* (1890). William Wilde wrote in the preface to his *Irish Popular Superstitions*: “These legendary tales and Popular Superstitions have now become the history of the past—a portion of the traits and characteristics of other days. Will their recital revive their practice? No! Nothing contributes more to uproot superstitious rites and forms than to print them; to make them known to the many instead of leaving them hidden among, and secretly practised by the few” (W. R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* [rpt. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973], p. vi).

¹⁰ Wilde, “The True Function and Value of Criticism; with Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue,” *Nineteenth Century*, 28 (1890), 131–32. Wilde published a revised version of this essay as “The Critic as Artist” in his *Intentions* (London: J. R. Osgoode, McIlvaine, and Co., 1891).

versational spontaneity, tending as it does to create opportunities for improvisation only within elaborately reticulated codes and structures—metrical constraints, mnemonic devices, standardized epithets, inventories, recursive architecture—that one might identify as writerly *avant la lettre*. Even if Wilde's work does not go so far as to make orality a hallucination of writing, it recognizes at least that "primary orality" is in part a construction by literate culture of its Other, and therefore not revivable in practice. Instead, Wilde's more formally transgressive writings, and his career generally, suggest that to import the forms of primary orality into typographical England does less to ventilate literate culture than to translate orality into terms that literacy can recognize—sustained circulation into plagiarism, a reservoir of proven formulas into self-plagiarism, and a cento of innovations, renovations, and appropriations into private literary property. Rather than naively imagine orality as a tonic to writing, as nature to writing's artifice, or as authenticity to the travesty of type, Wilde recognized that the longing for orality as origin, nature, and authentic prehistory may be the most characteristic thing about print culture, which thrives by manufacturing origins and measuring its distance from them in order, alternately, to wound or worship itself. His writing both embodies and produces an ache for the forms of orality while at the same time elaborately demonstrating their irrecuperability, even their unknowability: we must return to the voice, yet as it now is, we remain unable to do so.

I want to suggest, then, that Wilde is better understood as a self-conscious practitioner of a resuscitated "orality" than as a writer who happened to talk well and commit the odd plagiarism. Thus, his acts and celebrations of literary appropriation occurred across the cultural rift they simultaneously mapped, demonstrating how the normal operations of primary oral transmission become "literary crimes" in a private print culture. Toomey describes this clash elegantly:

[The] cardinal sins of literacy are cardinal virtues of orality. Originality in an oral culture consists not in inventing an absolutely new story but in stitching together the familiar in a manner suitable to a particular audience, or by introducing new elements into an old story. The persistent charge against Wilde of plagiarism would

seem oxymoronic in an oral culture. Wilde's tendency to start from the very familiar or traditional in his oral tales—something already given and known, the Bible, Fairy Tales, is again fully characteristic of orality. (p. 411)

Wilde's painstaking orality comes into sharpest focus with the reciprocity of his exchanges: though generous in his appropriations of published literary property, Wilde tended to be equally generous in allowing others to pilfer and profit by his ideas (the *Davenport* case is exceptional). Because writing, as he claimed, bored him, his listeners often reaped the profits for tales that he never bothered to publish; as Hesketh Pearson affirms, "countless stories of his invention have been published under other men's names and hundreds of his sayings have brightened other men's books"—not always identified as Wilde's, and seldom to his financial advantage.¹¹ Some dozen writers are known to have recorded Wilde's unwritten stories, and a handful more—including Frank Harris, George Moore, Arthur Symons, and Evelyn Waugh—published Wilde's oral tales as their own.¹² When one absconder confessed that he had published a Wilde tale under his own name, Wilde's response was revealingly mild: "Stealing my story was the act of a gentleman, but not telling me you

¹¹ Hesketh Pearson, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1946), p. 87. Wilde often professed his aversion to writing, thus perpetuating his reputation for literary wastrelsy. After captivating listeners with an impromptu story, he fended off Bernard Partridge's suggestion that he publish it by saying, "I don't think so, my dear fellow: it's such a bore writing these things out" (Pearson, p. 120). To demonstrate this boredom, he spoke of writing only in rote mechanical terms, as "putting black upon white" (p. 147). Even his jokes about his facility as a playwright couched his dislike of writing in avowals of laziness. Asked by director George Alexander to cut a scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde complained: "This scene that you feel is superfluous cost me terrible exhausting labour and heart-rending nerve-racking strain. You may not believe me, but I assure you on my honour that it must have taken fully five minutes to write" (Pearson, p. 225). Still, as much as the supposed meagerness of Wilde's literary production may have stemmed from his resistance to writing, his preference for talk over text comports with the little philosophy that he did write down. In his 1889 essay "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" Wilde implicitly defends himself alongside the poet/forgery/poisoner Wainwright: "it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something" ("Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study," *Fortnightly Review*, 51 [1889], 43; Wilde published a revised version of this essay in *Intentions*).

¹² See Toomey, pp. 407–8.

had stolen it was to ignore the claims of friendship.”¹³ Since Wilde regarded published material as “public property,” unpublished oral tales were the more appropriable for being the stuff of a communal experience—so long as an oral acknowledgment of the appropriation was made. Wilde not only plagiarized but also created a community of plagiarists; by scattering his literary ideas around him for others to seize freely, he united writers in theft. In doing so, he endowed a private print culture with the dynamics of an oral one: stories received as gifts were passed on as gifts; narratives branched in abundant retellings, limning a community through circulation rather than reinforcing private ownership through accumulation. In such a community, narrative seldom came to rest in an individual trove; instead, it was passed along from hand to hand in a lively parody of private literary property.

Not one to abjure print entirely for bardic recitation, though, Wilde-the-writer returned to the voice by way of oral transmission patterns rather than vocal cadences, allowing the dynamics of primary orality to occupy and restructure the space of writing. The texts that host this *geste*—besides the Chatterton lecture manuscript and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1889) one might add “The Sphinx without a Secret” (1891) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), among others—set up informational economies that mimic the dynamics of private intellectual property law; they extravagantly calcify ideas, expressions, beliefs, and theories so that they circulate like objects, from one lone possessor to the next. To these satirical models of the literary marketplace under copyright, Wilde’s works supply their phonocentric, collectivist alternatives through negative example, and often through form as well: ambiguous genres disrupt the reading protocols of literary culture, and transgressive compositional methods (e.g., plagiarism) disrupt as well the ethical and legal codes that protect private literary property. Thus the ghost of orality lodges in the commodified house of literary culture.

This Wildean haunting finds its most dramatic expression in his Chatterton lecture notes of 1886, a work whose genre is

¹³ Wilde, quoted in W. B. Maxwell, *Time Gathered: Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938), p. 97.

as ambiguous as its compositional method is transgressive: the notes are a pastiche of clippings and handwriting seemingly intended for both oral delivery and eventual publication, and they plagiarize page upon page from other writers' books. Indeed, I view the Chatterton manuscript not as the product of simple indolence or journeyman's haste but as a self-conscious and thoroughgoing meditation on the ideologies embedded in dominant concepts of literary crime and literary property—as an intervention whose plagiarized form supplies the punchline to the joke that its content tells about forgery.¹⁴ Similarly, I read "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." as a parable about literary property that revisits the transgressive gestures of the Chatterton manuscript, but with the difference that it more overtly theorizes and licenses the earlier work's appropriations according to a heterodox, fundamentally oral model of circulation and valuation—and for a less occulted audience. Where the Chatterton manuscript conflates the signature traits of literary with oral culture, "Mr. W. H." collapses theory into theater, travestying copyright's tendency to commodify ideas and belief. Both works conscripted the figure of Thomas Chatterton to a sustained assault on the indwelling ideology of private intellectual property, just

¹⁴ I undertake such an argument advisedly. Josephine Guy has warned against what she sees as a critical tendency to read Wilde's plagiarism and self-plagiarism as consistent, deliberate, political practices; she suggests that they may equally have resulted from the time and money pressures under which Wilde frequently wrote. Discerning a political gesture behind every writerly move, Guy admonishes, risks letting Wilde-the-genius back in through the kitchen door: who besides an infallible master-orchestrator could plan every appropriation? The virtuoso must at least be counterbalanced by the journeyman, the political Wilde by the writerly Wilde. Though such an argument begs the question of whether acts born of carelessness can produce subversive ends, I take Guy's cautionary gesture seriously. Without suggesting that Wilde's lifelong attitudes toward literary crime and property were consistent and consistently politicized, however, I persist in seeing the Chatterton manuscript as one of several important contributions on Wilde's part toward a deeply rooted critique of private literary property and its ideological mascot, the figure of the individual original genius. (I differ from Guy by finding no ironclad correspondence between intentionality and consecration; a writer may mean without winning worship.) See Josephine M. Guy, "Self-Plagiarism, Creativity and Craftsmanship in Oscar Wilde," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 41 (1998), 10. In her essay Guy deals strictly with Wilde's self-plagiarism; her warning against the easy politicization of Wilde's plagiarism occurs in an unpublished early version of the essay given at the International Oscar Wilde Conference at the University of Birmingham in 1997.

as that ideology was being powerfully—and perhaps irreversibly—consecrated in law and in the marketplace.



By the time Wilde was composing his lecture notes, Thomas Chatterton had been the subject of a century's worth of encomia and special-pleading; to invoke him in the mid-1880s, then, was to participate in a tradition of reimagining Chatterton according to one's agenda. Coleridge had made him a sort of patron saint of neglected and martyred geniuses in his 1794 "Monody on the Death of Chatterton"; Wordsworth enduringly dubbed him "the marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perish'd in its pride" in "Resolution and Independence" (1807); and Keats's 1815 sonnet "To Chatterton" followed suit.¹⁵ In 1856 Henry Wallis exhibited his celebrated painting *The Death of Chatterton*, which sensationally fixed its subject in the Victorian imagination as an eroticized male ephebe (Wallis used a twenty-seven-year-old George Meredith as his model for Chatterton), *déshabillé* and exquisite even in death—a figure that resonates in the beautiful, self-slain Cyril Graham of Wilde's "Mr. W. H."

By 1880 the Romantic fascination and affiliation with Chatterton had enshrined the poet as Romanticism's key precursor. In that year Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to Hall Caine that "not to know Chatterton is to be ignorant of the *true* day-spring of modern romantic poetry," a view that Wilde would claim in his lecture, shortly before concluding it with an untitled Rossetti sonnet that likened Chatterton to Shakespeare and Milton.¹⁶

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence," in *Poem in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 125; ll. 43–44. Keats also dedicated his *Endymion* (1817–18) to Chatterton, and Shelley lists him among "The inheritors of unfulfilled renown" who rise from their thrones to welcome the soul of Keats in *Adonais*, his 1821 elegy for the poet (see *Adonais*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers [New York: W. W. Norton, 1977], p. 403; l. 397). In a June 1877 letter to Lord Houghton, Wilde unites Keats (whom he glosses as "a Priest of Beauty slain before his time") with Guido Reni's St. Sebastian under the Chattertonian icon of the martyred ephebe, "killed by the arrows of a lying and unjust tongue" (*Letters*, p. 41).

¹⁶ Rossetti, quoted in T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), p. 185. The Wildean theme and practice of appropriation have

Even nearer to Wilde's rhetorical trajectory was an unsigned *Foreign Quarterly Review* essay published in 1842 (since attributed to Robert Browning), which opens with a cursory review of a book on Tasso by one Richard Henry Wilde (no relation) but quickly swerves into an extended discussion of Chatterton. Coleridge, Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Rossetti had praised the boy-poet without overt reference to his famous forgeries, seeming rather to insist on his authentication by heaven and on his status as "true day-spring." Browning, by contrast, addressed Chatterton's forgery directly, if only to acquit him of lasting blame on the basis of financial necessity; referring to the poet's occasional habit of making centos from appropriated language, Browning wrote: "There is never theft for theft's sake with Chatterton."¹⁷

Wilde adopted Browning's strategies of distortion and special-pleading on behalf of the young forger, but with a further twist: instead of excusing Chatterton's forgeries, Wilde celebrated them as a theft for art's sake.¹⁸ Tellingly, this formulation also applies to Wilde's purloined lecture. Like the Romantic poets, Wilde had appropriated Chatterton as a personal ancestor—but for Wilde, the poet was the founder of the artistic kleptocracy to which he imagined himself the heir. Insofar as a forger is always "inventing his own inheritance," as Susan Stewart puts it,¹⁹ Chatterton had originated a kind of genealogy,

proven contagious in the limited reception of his Chatterton notes: in his Wilde biography Richard Ellmann misattributes to Wilde the Dante Gabriel Rossetti sonnet on Chatterton that concludes the lecture manuscript (Wilde's criminal borrowings as a writer seem to license such an error). See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 285; and Roger C. Lewis, "A Misattribution: Oscar Wilde's 'Unpublished Sonnet on Chatterton,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 28 (1990), 164–69. Another Rossetti sonnet, "Tiber, Nile, and Thames" (1881), mourns for Chatterton—along with Keats and Coleridge—as a poet whose "sweet speech" London scorned.

¹⁷ Robert Browning (attrib.), unsigned review of *Conjectures and Researches concerning the Love Madness and Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso* by Richard Henry Wilde, *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 29 (1842), 471n.

¹⁸ For a more extended discussion of Wilde's debt to Browning's Chatterton essay, see Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 70–73.

¹⁹ See *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), p. 149. Stewart is writing here of Chatterton, arguing that the textual apparatus that he forged to authenticate his Rowley poems is "designed to serve as a genealogy for Chatterton's own situation," which she partly describes as being

though one that was only transmissible by a perpetual rewriting of origins. In conscripting Chatterton, his legatees reenacted the fictionality of origins even while embodying a longing for their legitimacy.

Wilde lectured at least once on the “marvellous boy,” on 24 November 1886 to an audience of eight hundred at London’s Birkbeck College.²⁰ The talk was part of a failed campaign by Wilde and Herbert Horne, editor of the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, to build a Chatterton monument at the poet’s school in Bristol. Wilde’s lecture was slated for publication in the *Hobby Horse*, which announced in October 1886 that “Mr. Oscar Wilde’s article on Chatterton has been unavoidably postponed until the January number.” But the article never appeared. No contemporary reactions to the talk seem to exist, but Wilde’s lecture notes have survived in manuscript.²¹ As with the later essay “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” the narrative traced by the notes is part biography, part aesthetic theory, part special pleading. The notes are also a meditation on genius, authenticity, originality, authorial identity, and literary property, revealing as much about Wilde’s own self-fashioning as they do about Chatterton. Bafflingly, though, they remain unpublished. That the notes exist only in manuscript form may result from the fact, embarrassing to many Wildeans, that they are not purely

“caught between two models of authorship: the medieval and Renaissance model of the patron, and the newly emerging contemporary schema of commercial publishing centered in London”—hence Chatterton’s simultaneous reverence for and willingness to make free with the past (Stewart, pp. 149–50).

²⁰ The audience count is Wilde’s, from a 7 December 1886 letter to Herbert P. Horne (see *Letters*, p. 192). Wilde evidently gave the lecture a second time, on 7 April 1888; he agreed to it (“If I must, I must!”) in a letter to the lecture’s hostess, postmarked 19 March 1888 (see *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis [London: John Murray, 1985], p. 73). Ellmann (p. 284) places it in March.

²¹ See Lawrence Danson, *Wilde’s Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 90. It is not known exactly what relation the Chatterton manuscript bears either to the lectures that Wilde gave or to the article slated for the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*. I find persuasive Danson’s reasons for thinking the manuscript a probable text of the lecture as delivered: “It would be nice to think that this was merely a source-book, but Wilde’s finicky alterations of a word here or a phrase there suggest that it is the text of the lecture pretty much as he delivered it, with notes to himself about subjects to elaborate either extempore during delivery or later in revision” (p. 90). If Wilde did in fact appropriate most of an *orally* delivered speech from written sources, we are left with the still-thorny question of whether such a plagiarism is of the same order as a *written* appropriation from written sources.

manuscript: outnumbering the pages of Wilde's cursive are dozens of printed pages cut bodily out of two books on Chatterton—Daniel Wilson's *Chatterton: A Biographical Study* (1869) and David Masson's *Chatterton: A Story of the Year 1770* (1874)—and pasted into Wilde's notebook. Such clippings might be pardoned as overzealous scrapbook keeping, but Wilde has done more than cut and paste; he has struck out irrelevant or awkward passages, added occasional words, and written transitions between Wilson's and Masson's biographical work to build a smooth narrative of purloined texts.

These glaring and protracted plagiarisms awaken several reactions in Wilde's late-twentieth-century readers. Richard Ellmann is silent on the subject of the cuttings. Rodney Shewan describes Wilde's script as "augmented by clippings from printed biographies," suggesting that "these notes were intended to form the basis of the article announced for the October number of the *Hobby Horse*."²² But Merlin Holland admits that "whatever the proposed destination for the piece, [Wilde] was clearly going to use several thousand words of someone else's research in his piece"; he finds Wilde's methods "profoundly disturbing" (p. 203).

Part of what disturbs about the Chatterton manuscript is that it pleads both innocent and guilty to charges of plagiarism, by turns concealing and confessing its own illicit mode of production. A long opening paragraph tantalizingly names "the contortions that precede artistic production," but it forbears to mention Chatterton's forgeries, instead sliding to a biographical generalism. Typically coy, Wilde beckons his listeners forward by warning them away, admonishing that "it is almost better for us not to search too curiously into the details of the artist's life" even as he prepares to lay Chatterton bare. The warning enticement serves for Wilde as well—to read on is to see Wilde's literary crimes laid bare, and thereby to confront a central aspect of his work:

The contortions that precede artistic production are so constantly treated as qualities of work[s] of art that one is sometimes tempted to wish that all art were anonymous. For every true artist, even [t]he portrait painter or dramatist, be his work absolutely

²² See Ellmann, pp. 284–85; and Shewan, p. 70.

objective in presentation, still reveals himself in his manner. Even abstract forms such as music and colour have much to tell us about the nature of him who fashioned them, and take the place of the biographer. Indeed in some cases it is almost better for us not to search too curiously into the details of the artist's life—the *incompleteness* of Keats' life for instance blinds many of his critics to the *perfection* of his song—and it is well on the whole that we know so little about Shakespeare. [Quotes Matthew Arnold's sonnet to Shakespeare.]

Yet there are cases where the nature of the artist is so bound up with the nature of the man, that art criticism must take account of history and physiology in order to understand the work of art. And this is specially so in the case of Chatterton—without a full comprehension of his life the secret of his literature is not revealed—and so in going over the details of the life of this marvellous boy I do so not to mar the perfect joy and loveliness of his song by any overemphasis of the tragedy of his death, but simply to enable us to understand the curious form he used, and to appreciate an art that to many may seem an anachronism.²³

The “curious form” or “anachronism” that Chatterton used was, of course, forgery: during his brief literary career, the boy from Bristol wrote numerous poems, romances, and genealogies, passing them off as the work of a fictional fifteenth-century monk named Thomas Rowley. At the level of self-revelation, Wilde's lecture will also “enable us to understand” its own “curious form”—plagiarism. What forgery and plagiarism share is the crime of misattribution, a manipulation of the tie between authorial identity and property: the forger annexes another's name to his own text, while the plagiarist annexes another's text to his own name. In other ways, these twin violations are importantly separate: forgery is a sin against authenticity, whereas plagiarism is a sin against originality. But the forger's mismatch of property and identity clears discursive space for

²³ Oscar Wilde, [*Essay on Chatterton*], unpublished manuscript at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Wilde W6721M3. E78 [1886?]; Finzi 2440; [pp. 3–7]. The manuscript is not paginated, and most of the text is written in pencil on recto pages. The Wilde excerpts from the Chatterton manuscript are © 2000 held by The Estate of Oscar Wilde. I wish to thank The Estate of Oscar Wilde and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library for their kind permission to quote from the Chatterton notebook.

the plagiarist's mirror-image crime. While he addressed the one, Wilde was both committing and theorizing the other.

Western intellectual property law holds that the bond between author and text is natural, essential, and inimitable; by marking a text with a singular stylistic thumbprint, the author earns and asserts ownership of it. The opening paragraph of Wilde's Chatterton lecture rehearses this argument in order to assail it: "every true artist . . . reveals himself in his manner," while his works "tell us about the nature of him who fashioned them, and take the place of the biographer." Because the manner proceeds unmediated from the man, all art is biography. But here Wilde begins to equivocate, one moment denouncing the frequent conflation of art with artist by wishing "that all art were anonymous," the next moment arguing that Chatterton's art cannot be understood apart from the artist. The equivocations continue throughout the manuscript, with Wilde alternately marveling at Chatterton's mimicry and detecting moments when his true voice can be heard within the forgeries: at one moment, a "sly touch of humour betrays the modern Rowley's hand" [p. 79]. Is style, then, an essential property of the individual writer, or is it an accidental one? Wilde registers a rhetorical rather than an intellectual uncertainty: how is it best to justify Chatterton's forgeries—by contextualizing them within the poet's life narrative, or by launching a theoretical assault on the iron bond between authorial identity and property?

As usual, Wilde does both, grafting Wilson's and Masson's biographical materials onto his own more theoretical passages so that he may both narrate and exonerate Chatterton's forgeries. Environment figures highly in the Wilde-Masson-Wilson account, as it did in Browning's 1842 essay. As the nephew of the local sexton, Chatterton the future forger was exposed at an early age to a trove of medieval documents—registers, accounts, and title deeds to church property—kept in the muniment room of Bristol's Church of the Blessed Mary of Redcliffe. During his life, Thomas Chatterton Sr. had pilfered these parchments to use as binding papers in the school where he was master; after his death, his son made them his playthings, and exposure to the papers awoke in him a kind of *de facto* neoclassicism. "In all probability," Wilson writes in one of the clippings,

“Chatterton’s first efforts with the pencil and pen were scrawled on the margins of deeds in imitation of characters engrossed in the time of the Plantagenets” [pp. 27–29]. Later, money troubles led Chatterton to try profiting by his penchant for mimicry. Wilde and Wilson recount how the boy—always the inventor of inheritances, whether for himself or for others—forged a patent of nobility connecting a local pewterer, Mr. Burgum, to the noble De Bergham family.²⁴ Wilde decriminalizes the forgery by calling it “a brilliant if somewhat daring act of imagination” [p. 57], even as he links the crime to Chatterton’s poverty. Wilde contracts this ambivalence from Wilson, who does not know how to parse Chatterton’s mixture of authenticity and fakery, innocence and criminality. Wilson writes:

It was with Chatterton’s heraldry, as with his antique prose and verse: a vein of earnestness is inextricably blended with what, in other respects, appears as palpable fraud. We are reminded of the boy and the visionary dreamer, in the midst of his most elaborate fictions, till it becomes a puzzle to determine how much of self-deception and of actual belief were blended with the humour of the jest. [p. 61]²⁵

The Burgum scam’s financial motivations reappear in Chatterton’s grandest deception, his attempt to sell several “Thomas Rowley” manuscripts to Horace Walpole. The forgery was nearly bought, in both senses, until a friend of Walpole’s cast doubt on the authenticity of a sample, precipitating Chatterton’s confession. As a nameless, penniless adolescent from Bristol, the young poet lacked the allure of his fifteenth-century pseudo-

²⁴ Chatterton was hoping for a lucrative reward. Burgum, however, paid his “genealogist” one lone crown, for which tight-fistedness Chatterton later took him to task: “Gods! what would Burgum give to get a name / And snatch his blind’ring Dialect from Shame / What would he give to hand his mem’ry down, / To time’s remotest Boundary—a Crown” ([*Will*], in *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton: A Bicentenary Edition*, ed. Donald S. Taylor and Benjamin J. Hoover, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], I, 50).

²⁵ Daniel Wilson, quoted in Wilde, [*Essay on Chatterton*]. The Chatterton lecture notes challenge our usual practices of scholarly citation; this one might more properly be keyed directly to Daniel Wilson, *Chatterton: A Biographical Study* (London: Macmillan, 1869).

nym, and Walpole spurned him.²⁶ Borrowing antique glamour or a noble title had been the only way to overcome the stigmata of youth, poverty, and anonymity; unmasked, Chatterton succumbed first to his debts, and eventually to suicide.

The most extraordinary aspect of Wilde's Chatterton lecture is not the simple fact of its plagiarisms but rather the uncanny way that it absorbs its interpolations. By excising a few archaisms from Wilson's and Masson's prose ("improved their lear together" becomes "were educated" [p. 65]), much as Chatterton had added them to his own ("forletten," "mitches," "chyrche-glebe"), Wilde produced a cento or patchwork text whose style is believably "Wildean" throughout. That none of his listeners seems to have recognized Wilde's plagiarisms further illustrates the lesson of both the lecture notes and Chatterton's life: that the essentialist notion of individual style has more to do with readerly expectations than with authorial self-identity.

Uncanny, too, is the way that the Wilson and Masson clippings work preposterously as a gloss on the very text they help to constitute—as if Wilde chose to clip-and-save only those passages that spoke to his activity of plagiarizing. Thus Wilson's account of the primal scene of Chatterton's literary crimes—his imitating medieval characters in the margins of ancient church parchments—not only exposes the mingled root systems of forgery and plagiarism but also doubles as an account of Wilde's own appropriations, his own criminal neoclassicism. The Burgum pedigree swindle, the story of a fakery that claims to authenticate, holds the mirror up to Wilde's plagiarisms, a thievery that claims to originate. And Chatterton's libelous will, which Wilde clipped from both Masson's and Wilson's texts,

²⁶ Wilde subtly alleges homosexuality in Chatterton by eroticizing the bosom friendship that Chatterton created between Thomas Rowley and William Canynge[s] (1399?–1474), mayor of Bristol. At the end of one Rowley manuscript, Chatterton describes how the two friends had lived together in their dotage. Wilde writes: "So ends this marvellous romance which Chatterton not only wrote but lived—it is his own story—but he had not yet *found* his *Canynge*" [pp. 81–83]. When Walpole later rejects the Rowley manuscripts as inauthentic, Wilde frames Chatterton's tragic fate as romantic defeat: "Walpole accordingly returned the manuscripts. Chatterton's dream of a real Canynge was over" [p. 103]. In "Mr. W. H." Wilde takes up and intensifies the theme of male friendships that are interdependently intertextual and homosexual.

echoes the Burgum forgery by satirizing orthodox transmissions of property. Instead of bequeathing his material property (he had none), Chatterton wills his personal properties—mostly unappreciated virtues—to his heirs, berating them in the process. Thus his modesty is to be divided between Mr. Burgum and “any young lady who can prove, without blushing, that she wants that valuable commodity,” while he leaves “to Bristol all my spirit and disinterestedness, parcels of goods unknown on her quays since the days of Canning and Rowley” [p. 109]. Chatterton’s humility, religion, powers of utterance, free thinking, moderation, abstinence, and generosity are disposed of in like fashion, and the will ends with a satire not only on inheritance but also on the very nature of material and literary property:

I leave Mr. Clayfield the sincerest thanks my gratitude can give; and I will and direct that, whatever any person may think the pleasure of reading my works worth, they immediately pay their own valuation to him, since it is then become a lawful debt to me, and to him as my executor in this case.

. . . I leave all my debts, the whole not five pounds, to the payment of the charitable and generous Chamber of Bristol, on penalty, if refused, to hinder every member from a good dinner by appearing in the form of a bailiff. If, in defiance of this terrible spectre, they obstinately persist in refusing to discharge my debts, let my two creditors apply to the supporters of the Bill of Rights.

[pp. 109–11]

By facetiously investing Mr. Clayfield with the posthumous proceeds from his literary work, Chatterton thumbs his nose at copyright law and the unwritten laws of authenticity that doomed him to anonymity during his lifetime. Having caricatured the concept of transmissible literary property, he goes on to bequeath his debts—a sort of anti-property—as if they were properly heritable.

In a sense, Wilde is the heir apparent to Chatterton’s negative legacy: the debts bequeathed by the forger are precisely what the plagiarist inherits, since Wilde’s lecture is a tissue of ill-gotten and unpaid literary debt. But Wilde is Chatterton’s intellectual heir in a more general sense as well. Toward the end of the lecture he argues (this time apparently in his “own” words,

though with Chattertonian echoes) that writers inherit *only* debt from their legators, and that English Romanticism itself is therefore a legacy of debts, even a legacy of theft:

All great artists have personality as well as perfection in their manner.

What seems technical is really spiritual—lyrical octosyllabic movement Scott stole [from] Coleridge. Coleridge got [from] Chatterton—what Coleridge claimed as a new principle in poetry—the anapestic variations in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion—was in reality Chatterton’s—influence of Chatterton seen in Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*[,] in Keats’ *Eve of St. Agnes*— . . . continuity of English poetry—Chaucer—Spenser—Chatterton—Coleridge—Keats—Tennyson—Morris. [pp. 155–59]

Wilde had opened the lecture by describing Chatterton in the orthodox terms of literary filiation and originality—as “the father of the Romantic movement in literature, the precursor of Blake, Coleridge and Keats, the greatest poet of his time” [p. 9]. But in closing it, he transvalues the English Romantic tradition from a patrilineage into a litany of theft: Scott stole from Coleridge, who stole from Chatterton; their thefts, in turn, begot Keats and Tennyson and Morris. No longer a genealogy of original geniuses, Romanticism is what a plagiarist (Coleridge, whose plagiarisms were well known by Wilde’s time) filched from a forger—much as the lecture itself is what a plagiarist stole *about* a forger. Moreover, these thefts of seemingly “technical” operations like the “lyrical octosyllabic movement” are transformed into the essence of literary identity. Wilde suggests that “spirit,” the writer’s inalienable “manner” or “personality” and the basis of private literary property, is a byword for spoils—a hot property. Thus, writers do not so much possess or exude originality as arrogate it to themselves by effacing illicit origins, claiming to own most what they most owe—a paradox borne out by Wilde’s own copious plagiarisms in the Chatterton manuscript.

The astonishing conclusion to Wilde’s lecture notes begins by trumpeting what the introduction had only murmured in euphemism: Chatterton’s forgery. By pardoning the poet’s liter-

ary crimes on aesthetic grounds, Wilde arrives at his most extreme formulation to date of the vaunted ethical/aesthetic divide. For this reason, the lecture's closing is the hatchery for ideas that would suffuse later works like "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.":

Was he [a] mere forger with literary powers or a great artist? The latter is the right view. Chatterton may not have had the moral conscience which is truth to fact—but he had the artistic conscience which is truth to Beauty. He had the artist's yearning to represent and if perfect representation seemed to him to demand forgery he needs must forge. Still this forgery came from the desire of artistic self effacement.

He was the pure artist—that is to say his aim was not to reveal himself but to give pleasure—an artist of the type of Shakespeare and Homer—as opposed to Shelley or Petrarch or Wordsworth.

[pp. 149–51]²⁷

Replace "forgery" with "plagiarism" and the star-turn of the Chatterton manuscript becomes a self-justification: if perfect representation seems to Wilde to demand plagiarism, then he needs must plagiarize, though the forger's "self-effacement" becomes self-aggrandizement in the plagiarist. "Perfect representation" is anchored not in the artist's accurate self-portraiture but in the necessity of "giving pleasure"—a pleasure that seems to justify even plagiarism. Wilde continues:

He was essentially a dramatist and claimed for the artist freedom of mood. He saw the realm of the imagination differed from the realm of fact. He loved to let his intellect play—to separate the artist from the man—this explains his extraordinary versatility. He could write polished lines like Pope, satire like Churchill, Philippic like Tu[ll]ius, fiction like Smollet—Gray, Collins, Macpherson's Ossian. Also his statements that "He is a poor author who cannot write on both sides" and this curious note found in his papers—"In a dispute concerning the character of David, it was argued that he must be a holy man from the strain of piety that breathes through his whole works—Being of a contrary opinion and knowing that a great genius can affect anything, endeavor

²⁷ On the verso [p. 150] Wilde writes in ink: "there was something in him of 'the yearning of great Vishnu to create a world.'"

oured in the foregoing poems to represent an enthusiastic Methodist.” [pp. 151–53]

In a gesture that he later anatomized in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde here pursues his thesis—that Chatterton’s works are incomprehensible outside his biography—only to dissuade himself in the end. Having set out to assert the identity between the artist and his art, Wilde concludes by sundering the two, insisting that true art conceals, rather than reveals, the artist. “Great genius” is not the self-identity of an original personality but rather a perfect ventriloquism—an “extraordinary versatility” that “can affect anything,” from scathing urban satire to bucolic odes to the famous forgeries of Macpherson.²⁸ Geniuses, scorning self-identity, “write on both sides” by throwing their voices into other personas, endowing David with the voice of an “enthusiastic Methodist.” By extension, genius is the ability not only to throw one’s own voice but also to appropriate the voices of others, as both Wilde and Coleridge did—a notion that would restore to plagiarism the identity of a cardinal virtue, an identity it could only possess outside the culture of copyright.²⁹

In the end, both celebrations and excoriations of the Chatterton manuscript must be mitigated partly by uncertainty: we will probably never know whether Wilde lectured directly from the notes, nor whether he intended to publish the lecture in its current larcenous form—though it is hard to believe that he would have courted extensive plagiarism charges so blatantly in a print medium. For some, Wilde’s plagiarisms are less objectionable given that he never claimed credit for them in print, as if the exclusively oral context of the text’s transmission lessened the criminality of its composition. But the hybrid status of the Chatterton manuscript makes it more durably problematic

²⁸ Wilde emphasizes the connection between genius and affectation by repeating his phrase in the manuscript, underscoring “affect”: “Importantly—‘a great genius can affect anything’” [p. 155].

²⁹ Wilde’s own voice was among those he appropriated: in one of his innumerable self-plagiarisms, he lifted the Chatterton lecture’s opening lines on “the conditions that precede artistic production” for a review of Joseph Skipsey’s *“Carols from the Coal-Fields” and Other Songs and Ballads* (see *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 February 1887, p. 5).

than such a simple pardon allows. Stranded in the middle territory between the privacy of the writing desk and the publicity of print, between its oral delivery and its textually complex materiality, the Chatterton manuscript is a conflatory space where the ethics of orality and literacy contaminate one another. Without doubt, the lecture's exclusively oral delivery makes its textual appropriations appear less transgressive. Yet the oral scene of the lecture's transmission seems reciprocally tainted by the criminal mode of the text's composition. Moreover, while the manuscript's appropriations may arise out of an oral practice, they can only be discerned as textual traces: Wilde's plagiarisms are plainly visible on the page but are inaudible in talk, reminding us that orality hardly recognizes even verbatim appropriation *as* appropriation. What the manuscript seems to work at illustrating is the affinity—even the identity—between writing and the potential criminalization of discourse.

One name for this affinity is copyright, which connects authors to their writings not only to protect those writings against criminal misappropriation but also to hold the author accountable for writings that may themselves be criminal. By pardoning Chatterton's ethical transgressions on aesthetic grounds, Wilde attempts to extend the same pardon to his manuscript, yearning through its form—its cardinal oral virtues of unembarrassed appropriation, adaptation, recirculation—for a precriminalized state of discourse. That yearning, though, is ultimately solipsistic: as far as we know, Wilde alone of his contemporaries both heard and read the manuscript, and he alone was privy to its agonistic games.

The hybrid nature of the Chatterton manuscript makes it a text with an original audience of one, a private joke at which only a future public could laugh, and then only with discomfort. Since even that joke would have vanished with its publication in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, Wilde salvaged what the manuscript achieved in its formal transgressions and made it the theme of his story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," which originally appeared in the July 1889 issue of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Despite its much larger audience, however, "Mr. W. H." did not abandon the Chatterton lecture's solipsistic tendencies altogether; instead, it demonstrated solipsism to be the residue left

by the waning of belief under empiricism and by the withering of uncommodified circulation under copyright.



As “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” begins, the narrator and his older friend, Erskine, are discussing literary forgeries in terms that echo the Chatterton lecture notes with the fidelity of a sequel: the forger’s criminality is soft-pedaled in the name of “perfect representation” and self-realization, and ethics are insistently winnowed from aesthetics.

I know that we had a long discussion about Macpherson, Ireland, and Chatterton, and that with regard to the last I insisted that his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an æsthetical problem.³⁰

³⁰ Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr W. H.,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 146 (1889), 1. Further references appear in the text. Wilde’s references to Macpherson, Ireland, and Chatterton in the passage not only constitute a short history of British literary forgery but also illustrate forgery’s relation to history. The Scot James Macpherson (1736–1796) published a cycle of poems about Finn MacCool, the ancient Celtic hero who crossed from Scotland to Ireland to fight the invading Danes; claiming only to have discovered and translated the poems, Macpherson attributed them to Finn’s son, the poet Ossian. In the 1790s William Henry Ireland (1777–1835) forged a small archive of “recovered” Shakespeare works, including the plays “Vortigern and Rowena” and “Henry II,” to impress his bookseller father. Both Macpherson and Ireland were exposed as forgers during their lifetimes, though neither committed Chattertonian suicide. Like Chatterton, though, they lent legitimacy to their own works by borrowing the aura of historical figures—Finn MacCool and Shakespeare—central to national literatures. For all three of the forgers that Wilde names, history was at once a legitimizing authority and a narrative that could be rewritten to suit their own aims. Such literary forgeries erode the very authority that they invoke for authenticity. In addition, a contemporary authority was also being undermined through forgery while Wilde was writing “Mr. W. H.” In 1887 Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish statesman who was spearheading the Home Rule initiatives in Parliament, was connected through a letter to an infamous political murder in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. As supporters of Parnell, Wilde and his brother followed the ensuing investigations, attending meetings of the Parnell Commission (see Ellmann, pp. 289–90). In February 1889, five months before “Mr. W. H.”

Art being “a mode of acting,” “Mr. W. H.” sets out not only to rehearse the preoccupations of Wilde’s Chatterton lecture but also to perform them in the theater of theory. Whereas more traditional criticism soberly analyzes and theorizes, “Mr. W. H.” *stages* analysis and theory in the theater of fiction, framing a “scientific” narrative (objective observation that revises a hypothesis to fit evidence) within an “aesthetic” one (subjective creation that disfigures evidence to fit hypothesis). In the process, the truth-claims of science and criticism are shown to be contingent on something at once less empirical and less moral: “the artistic conscience which is truth to Beauty,” the aesthetic truth that Wilde had used to license Chatterton’s criminal falsifications. At the same time, Wilde’s story coyly avoids identifying which frame—science or art—is finally outermost. By depicting quixotic characters in the act of concocting, transmitting, and dismissing a plausible literary theory, the tale removes generic and discursive markers crucial to interpretation, casting its readers into heuristic quicksand. Contemporary reviews of the piece registered its readers’ puzzlement at its ambiguous status. A reviewer in the *Tablet* remarked that in “Mr. W. H.” “Mr. Wilde has stopped short . . . of the true criticism,” but also wondered tentatively, “is Mr. Wilde joking?”³¹ In the *Westminster Review* Cecil W. Franklyn displayed his immunity to Wilde’s humor by chiding the piece for its fancifulness: “And the wide eye of conjecture may roll, in divine frenzy, over the ample Shakespearian fields, without fearing any let or hindrance in the form of the dead wall of certainty.”³² Rather than tolerate Wilde’s *mise-en-abîme* concentricisms of art (“the wide eye of conjecture”) and science (“the dead wall of certainty”), Franklyn condemned “Mr. W. H.” for infecting science with whimsy. In missing the tale’s central joke, he also missed its graver insinuation that art and science, like authenticity and

was published, Parnell was exonerated from the charges when the Dublin publisher Richard Pigott confessed to having forged the incriminating letter. Like Chatterton, Pigott killed himself soon after his exposure. I am indebted for aspects of my reading of “Mr. W. H.” to Simon Stern, with whom I had several fruitful discussions about Wilde’s story and about the history of literary property law.

³¹ “Oscar Wilde and Mr. W. H.,” *Tablet*, n.s. 42 (1889), 89, 88.

³² “William Shakespeare, Gentleman,” *Westminster Review*, 132 (1889), 361n.

falsity, are equally matters of convention, and thus the play-things of ideology. Remove the conventional generic signals and they become both indistinguishable and equally subject to manipulation.

Ultimately, the point of Wilde's experiment in amphibian genre is not to merge science and art but rather to plead their separation: if science traffics in the provable, then art should be impervious to proof or rationalization. The seemingly impermeable barrier that Wilde erects between ethics and aesthetics serves the similar purpose of protecting art from the normalizing gestures of "good conduct." In "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated" he would later write: "What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art."³³ For art to escape being the bondsman of public opinion, it needed a preserve of its own. Still, the barrier between ethics and aesthetics was itself a canny forgery, for Wilde had insisted in the Chatterton manuscript that the subversive and imaginative power of art-forgery lay specifically in its willingness to commit ethical transgressions—especially transgressions of the ethics of private property. Passing a fake off as original relativized the notion of authenticity, the basis of indwelling value in artistic property. By making free with societal codes that governed not only ideas of authenticity but also the transmission of authority and property (say in the case of a forged check or will), the forger menaced the basic infrastructures of a property-based society. As a parable about forgery, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is necessarily a parable about property as well.

Following their discussion of famous literary forgeries, Erskine asks the narrator, "What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it?" (p. 1). The young man in Erskine's story is an old school friend, Cyril Graham, an orphan raised by his maternal grandfather, Lord Crediton. In the dawn of their friendship Cyril is an "effeminate" (p. 3) boy-actor who plays Shakespeare's fe-

³³ [Oscar Wilde,] "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated," *Saturday Review*, 78 (1894), 533.

male ingenues at Eton and Trinity. After leaving school and the stage, Cyril develops a theory about Shakespeare's sonnets: the mysterious "Mr. W. H.," "Onlie Begetter" and sole dedicatee of the poems, was a beautiful boy-actor named Willie Hughes who became "the keystone of [Shakespeare's] dramatic power" (p. 15)—the lover and muse for whom he wrote parts like Juliet, Rosalind, and Cleopatra. But Erskine is skeptical. As the theory relies heavily on clues within the sonnets—their word-play on "Will" and "Hews," the poet's references to a fair young man who inspires him—it lacks the "independent evidence" to prove it as more than a narcissistic fantasy of Cyril's. Determined to convince Erskine at any cost, Cyril commissions a portrait of Willie Hughes holding a volume of the sonnets, passing it off as an authentic discovery. Erskine is converted, and for a blissful three months the two men "go over each poem line by line, till we had settled every difficulty of text or meaning" (p. 9). But when Erskine accidentally discovers the forgery, Cyril shoots himself in order to prove his unswerving fidelity to the theory, and (perversely) he wills Erskine the forged portrait as a plea for credence. A self-slain forger and boy-beauty, Cyril is a latter-day Chatterton.

Erskine remains unconvinced, but his tale converts the narrator, who spends months combing through the sonnets and scouring archives for traces of a historical Willie Hughes. As the evidence mounts, the researcher merges with the research, dissolving the scientific myth of objectivity: "Every day I seemed to be discovering something new, and Willie Hughes became to me a kind of spiritual presence, an ever-dominant personality" (pp. 14–15). Yet just as he mails his incontestable findings in a letter to Erskine, the narrator's belief ebbs entirely, and he renounces the theory as an invention—an unwitting forgery. When the two men meet, Erskine announces that he has now been won over to the theory and departs for Germany to establish that Willie Hughes should be recognized as "the first to have brought to Germany the seed of the new culture"—that he was the "Onlie Begetter" of German Romanticism (p. 17). Two years later the narrator receives a letter from Erskine, who announces his plan to repeat Cyril's suicide in the name of Willie

Hughes. The narrator rushes to Germany only to discover that Erskine's threat of suicide was itself a forgery: his friend has died of consumption and has bequeathed him the forged portrait. The narrator's friends are convinced that the portrait is authentic: "I have never cared to tell them its true history," he concludes; "But sometimes, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (p. 21).

If "Mr. W. H." is indeed a parable about property, then the portrait of Willie Hughes would seem to emblemize material property in general—that which is physical, ownable, and transferable. In a sense, Wilde's tale does nothing more than trace the portrait's production and circulation, calling special attention to the moments when it changes hands through inheritance. Commissioned by Cyril, the portrait passes from him to Erskine, who describes it as "the only legacy I ever received in my life" (p. 2); and after Erskine's death, his mother gives it to the narrator, telling him, "When George was dying he begged me to give you this" (p. 21). Like most material property, the portrait is owned by one party at a time, and then bequeathed to the next. Its materiality is foregrounded, too: the only physical object described at length by the narrator, it is also the sole piece of material "evidence"—albeit forged—for Cyril's theory.³⁴

³⁴ At the time that "Mr. W. H." was published, British copyright law allowed the copyright in paintings, drawings, and photographs to circulate separately from the physical artifact. The painter Augustus Egg, for example, purchased Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton* for £200 and subsequently sold the copyright for £150 to a publisher in Newcastle, while retaining the actual painting. The law also possessed a bizarre loophole by which the copyright could be lost—again, as if it were a physical object—to all parties. J. M. Lely wrote in 1891: "if the artist sells [paintings, drawings, or photographs] without having the copyright reserved to him by written agreement he loses it, but it does not vest in the purchaser unless there is an agreement signed in his favor. If therefore there is no agreement in writing—a very frequent occurrence—the copyright is altogether lost on a sale, though if the work be executed on commission, instead of being sold after being executed, the copyright in the absence of agreement vests in the person for whom it was executed" (J. M. Lely, *Copyright Law Reform: An Exposition of Lord Monkswell's Copyright Bill, Now Before Parliament* . . . [London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1891], pp. 7–8). As a commission, the Willie Hughes portrait in the tale would have circulated *with* its copyright. Nonetheless, the notion of a copyright dissociable from

But in Wilde's tale the capacity to be owned and exchanged is not exclusive to material property. As pivotal as the portrait-inheritance scenes are, the true medium of accumulation and transmission in the tale is a nonmaterial one: *belief*. Like the Willie Hughes portrait, belief in Cyril's theory of the sonnets can only be held serially, never simultaneously; it is transferred from Cyril to Erskine, from Erskine to the narrator, back to Erskine again, and finally—if tentatively—back to the narrator.³⁵ The fact that the narrator loses his faith just after mailing his evidence to Erskine confirms the tie between credence and material property. "I put into the letter all my enthusiasm," he writes, with unwitting literalism; "I put into the letter all my faith" (p. 18). Faith and enthusiasm, it turns out, behave exactly like individual material property: once put into the post, they pass like belongings from one owner to the next.³⁶ The scene of the narrator's apostasy is central to the tale's meditation on property, since it characterizes belief as a limited quantity that exhausts itself through expenditure:

It seemed to me that I had given away my capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets, that something had gone out of me, as it were, and that I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject. . . . Perhaps, by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself. Emotional forces, like the forces of physical life, have their positive limitations. Per-

the artifact it protects provides an extreme case of the commodification of information. The copyright no longer protects a property; it behaves fully *as* property.

³⁵ It is unclear whether or not Cyril loses his faith in the theory before his death. His suicide letter to Erskine claims that "he believed absolutely in Willie Hughes . . . and that in order to show [Erskine] how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was, he was going to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets" (p. 10). But Erskine accuses Cyril of losing faith: "You never even believed in it yourself. If you had, you would not have committed a forgery to prove it" (pp. 9–10). He also warns the narrator: "You forget that a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it" (p. 10). That Erskine's own "suicide" note appears to counterfeit his belief in the theory suggests the same of Cyril.

³⁶ William A. Cohen makes a similar point, though without dilating on the connection between credence and property: "To put the theory into a letter is not simply to transcribe it: more than its literal epistolary location, the Willie Hughes theory has the material qualities of a letter, in that only one person at a time can possess (that is, believe) it. It can be passed from one person to another, but it cannot be shared or divided" ("Willie and Wilde: Reading *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88 [1989], 228–29).

haps the mere effort to convert any one to a theory involves some form of renunciation of the power of credence. (pp. 18–19)

Belief here belongs to a closed economy where “emotional forces, like the forces of physical life, have their positive limitations,” and where poor husbandry can lead to exhaustion. According to such a dogma of parsimony, belief is the scarce money of the mind.

As a parable about ideal property that behaves like material property, “Mr. W. H.” is also a parable about literary property. In the age of patents and copyrights, ideas (such as belief, in Wilde’s tale) circulate like physical property: they are transferable, saleable, inheritable, legislated, privately owned. The Frenchman Charles Coquelin had condemned patent law’s reification of ideas along just these lines in his 1873 *Dictionnaire de l’économie politique*, impugning

that strange confusion of thought which puts on the same level an invention . . . the peculiar characteristic of which is that it can be disseminated through many minds and can be exploited in a hundred different places at the same time—with a material object, necessarily circumscribed, which, because it cannot be divided, can only be possessed by one man and which cannot be usefully exploited except where it is.³⁷

Intellectual property law stipulates that a person may copyright another person’s work so long as the copyrighter does something of his or her “own” to it; thus translators, abridgers, annotators, and anthologists may copyright their work. In Wilde’s tale each theorist “owns” (both possesses and professes) the Willie Hughes hypothesis only while he is adding to the work of a forerunner: Cyril revises Tyrwhitt (the eighteenth-century scholar who first proposed a boy-actor as addressee of the Sonnets), the narrator revises Cyril, and Erskine presumably revises the narrator. Tellingly, each man *professes* his belief in the theory only as long as he *possesses* it; the moment that he transfers

³⁷ Charles Coquelin, “Brevets d’invention,” *Dictionnaire de l’économie politique* (Paris, 1873), p. 217; quoted in Fritz Machlup and Edith Penrose, “The Patent Controversy in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Journal of Economic History*, 10 (1950), 12, n. 39.

the theory to another person, he can no longer own it in either sense.

Such a reading of "Mr. W. H." points out the human costs of subjecting beliefs and ideas to the paradigms of private property. At no point in the tale does a community of the faithful—or even a confraternity of the faithless—clearly exist; instead, the conversion of one person is always the result of another's apostasy. The lesson is that ideas and expressions that are privately held cannot be held in common.

As "Mr. W. H." warns against the commodification of art and belief, what does it hold out as an alternative? When Wilde referred to the tale he played up its focus on belief: "You must believe in Willy Hughes," he told Helena Sickert; "I almost do myself."³⁸ Although belief is in peril of being commodified into fact, it is also the only tonic to that process of commodification—hence Wilde's injunction, "You must believe."

The tale's embrace of credence and credulity is embedded not only in its thematics but also in a name. Cyril's grandfather and guardian, Lord Crediton, may be the sole character in the story who remains credulous: "To the present day Lord Crediton thinks that [Cyril's suicide] was accidental" (p. 10). The tie here between *credit* and *credence*, though, goes beyond a shared root in the Latin *credere*, "to believe": in Wilde's view, both belief and borrowing are forms of protest against private property. In the 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Lord Henry Wotton is offered money by his rich Uncle George (a kind of Lord Creditor), he declines, saying: "But I don't want money. It is only people who pay their bills who want that, Uncle George, and I never pay mine. Credit is the capital of a younger son, and one lives charmingly upon it"³⁹ Credit, for Wilde, stands in opposition to both thrift and inheritance, the cornerstones of individual property that embody its scarcity and its transferability; credit is a sort of fissure in individual property that leads back to communal property. So long as ideas, expressions, or beliefs can be owned as private property, they will circulate like

³⁸ Wilde, quoted in H. M. Swanwick [Helena Sickert], *I Have Been Young* (London: V. Gollancz, 1935), p. 66; quoted in Ellmann, p. 297.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Reviews and Reactions, Criticism*, ed. Donald L. Lawler (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. 30.

private property; thus: "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it."⁴⁰ By contrast, ideas and beliefs untrammelled by intellectual property forms might be the matrix of community—as in the oral traditions of the nonliterate rural Irish, where narratives were neither privatized nor slain in the name of absolute verity.

That credulity might outlast the assault of empiricism and commodification is the message of the ending of "Mr. W. H." Looking at the forged portrait that was the evidential linchpin in Cyril's "romantic theory" (p. 19), the narrator nonetheless thinks that "there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (p. 21). If the portrait disproves the theory on the level of fact, then it authenticates it on the level of art and belief; having been ejected from the realm of empiricism, the "romantic theory" has taken root in its proper soil, that of fable and founding myth.

Indeed, like the Willie Hughes theory it seems to advance, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." had an afterlife beyond its initial publication, though an ironic one: instead of adopting its anti-empiricist stance, the tale's disciples sought more "independent evidence" for the historical Willie Hughes. In dissuading itself of its own "real" viability, "Mr. W. H." had converted several of its readers—chief among them Lord Alfred Douglas, who fervently pursued the theory and in 1933 published his *True History of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, where he wrote: "Wilde's theory is so good and so ingenious that it is a thousand pities that he did not write it and put it forth as a theory and nothing else."⁴¹ In 1942, as William Cohen reports, reference to a William Hewes, a shoemaker's apprentice connected to Marlowe's company, was discovered in the Canterbury archives; life, it seemed, had obligingly imitated Wilde's art.⁴²

⁴⁰ Oscar Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *The Chameleon*, 1 (1894), 2.

⁴¹ Lord Alfred Douglas, *The True History of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Martin Secker, 1933), p. 34.

⁴² See Cohen, p. 241. Samuel Butler was also enough persuaded by "Mr. W. H." to devote years to the theory, though he never acknowledged Wilde's influence. A more ambivalent convert was James Joyce, whose "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter in *Ulysses* (1922) both alludes to Wilde's tale and reprises it more cynically: Stephen Dedalus, young *littérateur*, spins an elaborate psychobiographical theory of Shakespeare that unconverts the theorist without converting any of his listeners.

Striving to live by his pen in a literary market culture, Wilde himself was not always equal to the collectivist critique of private intellectual property that he mounted in the Chatterton manuscript and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." In a 22 May 1889 letter to William Blackwood about the latter piece, Wilde remarked: "I should like to retain the copyright myself. Have you any objection to this? If so, what arrangement do you propose?" (*Letters*, p. 244). Eight years later, in the pages of his long prison letter to Bosie, he lamented the loss of his copyrights in bankruptcy proceedings, and in the desperate financial straits of his final years he nearly sacrificed his friendship with Frank Harris to the royalties that he insisted Harris owed him for the *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry* scenario.⁴³ By the late nineteenth century, copyright was more to writers than a means of securing profits for their labors: it had become the birthright of the individual author—the property that he or she most properly owned, the inalienable reward for the inventions of original genius. To forfeit one's copyrights, then, was to forfeit the writerly aspect of the self.

But while he had benefited from literary property law, Wilde had also contributed to a counterdiscourse within private print culture, one that deplored the monopolistic, individualist incentives of copyright and that looked to the discursive practices of a vanishing nonliterate culture for a more collectivist alternative. Even more than Wilde's, our own historical moment is characterized by the super-commodification and radical privatization of information and invention: Western intellectual property law rewards the appropriations of collective property—tribal artwork, traditional farming techniques, shamanistic cures—by culturemarts, agribusinesses, and pharmaceutical giants, while recent twenty-year copyright-term extensions do more to protect corporate intellectual property holdings than to improve incentives for creative individuals.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Wilde, January-March 1897 letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, in *Letters*, p. 507.

⁴⁴ In 1995 the United Kingdom adopted the European Union's term of seventy years for copyright extensions, and the United States followed suit with the 1998 Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act. Among the growing number of publications calling for a radical reassessment of the political economics and metaphysics of intellectual property law, several seem to me indispensable: see Peter Jaszi and Martha Woodmansee, "The Ethical Reaches of Authorship," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 95 (1996), 947-77;

In isolation, the likes of Thomas Chatterton, Cyril Graham, and Willie Hewes seem antiquated and frail figures of dissent against such mammoth forces as transnational capital, neocolonialist bioprospecting, and international copyright and patent law. But they are also early manifestations of a growing tradition of dissent—one that aims to prevent intellectual property law from licensing tragic incursions on the public domain, cultural heterogeneity, and biodiversity. In the Chatterton manuscript and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde encoded his own heterodox views on the politics of literary property and oral/written agon. If those texts are the graves of forgone but generous alternatives, we could want no better reason to reopen them.

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James Boyle, *Shamans, Software, and Spleens: Law and the Construction of the Information Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996); Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Boston: South End Press, 1997); and Rosemary J. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1998).