

Introduction

The “fake studies” genre has been around long enough to have developed a number of conventions. The first is to declare an allegiance at the outset with either the universalists or the particularists, the lumpers or the splitters. Chicanery is both universal and perennial, but it assumes different forms in different ages; a critic may therefore choose to emphasize either its timeless or its timely aspects. Anthony Grafton, the most prominent of the universalists, begins his polymathic survey of fakes with some of the oldest surviving fragments from Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, and every few years we are treated to new frauds, whether as sinister as Kujau’s Hitler diaries or as trivial as the lip-synching antics of Milli Vanilli. “A relatively restricted group of colors,” Grafton observes, “makes the forger’s palette, now as two millennia ago.”¹ Others, however, prefer to talk about forgeries as the products of a specific age, understanding them only against the background of that age. Ian Haywood, for example, notes that “The forgeries of Macpherson and Chatterton were intimately related to eighteenth-century British historiography,” and limits his discussion to that period.²

Though I appreciate the virtues of both approaches, in this study I cast my lot with the particularists. This is partly because eighteenth-century Britons were convinced that theirs was an exceptional age of deception, and they became increasingly concerned with authenticity over the course of the century. This evidence from the English Short Title Catalogue should not be accepted without qualification, but it shows an unmistakable trend: in the first decade of the eighteenth century, only one English book included the word *authentic* in its title. In the next decade there were 6; in the twenties, 7; in the thirties, 15; in the forties, 77; and so on, increasing each decade, to fully 324 titles asserting their authenticity in the nineties. Words like *genuine* and *real* show similar, albeit less dramatic, rises:

Table 1

	Authentic	Genuine	Real
1700–1709	1	10	27
1710–19	6	31	70
1720–29	7	36	56
1730–39	15	86	31
1740–49	77	187	52

1 Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, p. 49.

2 Haywood, *The Making of History*, p. 15. Haywood has also written a more universalist book: although *Faking It* devotes much of its attention to eighteenth-century cases, it also looks back to the biblical Apocrypha and continues into the late twentieth century.

	Authentic	Genuine	Real
1750–59	90	254	89
1760–69	105	268	111
1770–79	139	390	106
1780–89	233	237	116
1790–99	324	302	214

Part of this increase can be attributed to the overall growth in the number of publications, but the constant increase, with the use of *authentic* rising more than 30,000 percent from the first decade to the last, cannot be entirely explained away: something was in the air. Authors and booksellers sensed that readers in 1749 would be more impressed with *An Authentic Account of the Whole Conduct of the Young Chevalier* than *An Account of the Whole Conduct*, presumably because inauthentic versions of the story might be circulating and consumers needed reassurance.

More important than any apparent rise in the amount of actual forgery, though, is the way people responded to it. The forgers' palettes may have been limited, but I have come to believe that some of the *responses* to deceptions were genuinely new in eighteenth-century Britain. However limited the varieties of forgery, and however little modern fakers differ from their ancient predecessors, the methods of *detecting* and *arguing about* fakes have changed in important ways. The obvious methods for detecting, say, a questionable painting or manuscript today—ultraviolet light, carbon-14 dating, dendrochronology, spectroscopy—did not exist in the eighteenth century; even tools like the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which allow critics to spot potentially anachronistic words in a suspicious document, were unavailable. Eighteenth-century writers had to work only with taste, with their knowledge of the language, and above all with forensic rhetoric, and they had to develop the techniques for conducting these debates largely on their own. I am therefore convinced it is more productive to talk about these eighteenth-century British disputes in a specifically eighteenth-century British context. More to the point, by examining eighteenth-century British debates over authenticity I hope to understand something about eighteenth-century Britain itself.

A second common convention in the genre of forgery studies is to declare an allegiance with the fakers. This can take at least two forms: either denying that they committed any crime, or celebrating them for upsetting the status quo. There is a long critical tradition, for example, of exculpating forgers by suggesting they are not really forgers: James Macpherson's *Fingal*, says one critic, is not a forgery but "a synthetic epic"; Thomas Chatterton, says another, was "not a cunning forger ... but an undisciplined Puckish Romanticist."³ Many writers seem to take for granted the assumption that all forgers are villains, and therefore unsympathetic. They therefore

3 Gaskill, *Ossian Revisited*, p. 6 (the phrase is repeated in "Ossian in Europe," p. 646); Meyerstein, *Life of Thomas Chatterton*, p. 109. Nick Groom asks in the introduction to his collection of essays on Chatterton, "Were they really forgeries?" (*Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, p. 3).

scramble to save their subjects from ignominy and to prove they do not deserve the name “forger.” Other commentators have decided rather to embrace the label of “criminal” and to delight in the outlaw’s powerful romantic imaginative appeal. The tradition stretches back at least to the Romantic reception of Chatterton, but it is especially common now, when cultural transgression is hip. K. K. Ruthven goes further in this direction than most in a recent book “about the power of literary forgeries to disturb the societies in which they are produced”: frauds, he insists, “destabilise the dualism which represents the fake as a nefarious singularity, whose virtuous adversary is another putative singularity called the genuine.”⁴ Forgers, embodiments of the folkloric Trickster, are the heroes of his book for their relentless deconstruction of society’s binary oppositions.

For both sets of partisans of the fakers, the debunkers are the enemy, and the critics set their sights accordingly. For the exculpatory school, the investigators are literal-minded boobs unable to appreciate the forgers’ true genius; for Ruthven and other champions of the fakers, they are mean-spirited and conservative spoilsports. It is no surprise that scholars who have devoted years to Macpherson or Chatterton should come to appreciate, even to identify with, their subjects, and to resent those who brought shame to them. Sometimes the attacks get downright nasty: Howard Gaskill, Macpherson’s most distinguished modern champion, accuses Samuel Johnson of “dogmatic close-mindedness and racial bigotry (for that is what it is).”⁵ E. H. W. Meyerstein has few kind words for Horace Walpole, and Edmond Malone comes in for a drubbing in the works of some students of William Henry Ireland.

I have no intention of replacing these attacks with hagiography, turning bitter establishment killjoys into selfless champions of truth and justice. They were not always on the side of the angels. The motives and actions of the skeptics were sometimes as complicated as those of the fakers; several even had their own brushes with fraud of one sort or another. Walpole, who played a role in discrediting Chatterton, has sometimes been accused of forging his *Castle of Otranto*; it is now widely accepted that George Steevens, who helped to debunk William Henry Ireland’s claims, committed his own fabrications. There is evidence that Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry*, which contains an important attempt to contextualize the Rowley poems in English literary history, includes a number of outright deceptions.⁶ Even Samuel Johnson, one of the century’s most tireless enemies of fraud, published his own compositions as if they were parliamentary debates, as one of his antagonists in the Ossianic disputes reminded readers.⁷ Still, while the work of the fakers has come to be appreciated for its complexities and its engagement with the cultural

4 Ruthven, *Faking Literature*, pp. 2, 66.

5 Gaskill, “The Manuscript Myth,” p. 14. See, however, his admission that “he was not entirely the anti-Scottish bigot he is often made out to be” (Gaskill, “‘Ossian’ Macpherson,” p. 130).

6 See Freeman and Freeman, *John Payne Collier*, 1:184–93. On Steevens, see also Paull, *Literary Ethics*, p. 33. John M. Ellis argues that the Brothers Grimm “deliberately, persistently, and completely misrepresented the status of their tales” (*One Fairy Story too Many*, p. viii).

7 See Meek, *A Small Tribute*, p. 5. For more on Johnson’s parliamentary debates, see Thomas Kaminski, *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson*, pp. 29–30, 123–43.

currents of eighteenth-century Britain, the work of their critics has usually been treated reductively. I hope to take the critics of the fakers as seriously as others have treated the fakers themselves.

The approach I take in this book deserves some attention, beginning with how I define “deception.” Forgery and fakery cannot always be reduced to a simple and self-evident matter of right or wrong: instead they constitute a continuum ranging from perfectly innocuous misrepresentation through the utmost perfidy. But while we may know deception when we see it, it is difficult both to define it and to explain exactly what is wrong with it. “There are, we sometimes tend to think, artistic crimes,” writes Stephan Körner, “but they are not as clearly defined or graded as are murder, theft, or treason.”⁸ In an essay on artistic forgery, Michael Wreen acknowledges “a disturbing truth in Körner’s remark: we do tend to think that there are artistic crimes, but we are ill prepared either to define or to say what is wrong with them.”⁹

Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics have worked to understand the complications inherent in any notion of authenticity, and much of this work is fascinating. Susan Stewart’s meditations on authenticity in *Crimes of Writing* are consistently thought-provoking, even exemplary—and yet, as I came to write this book, I found *Crimes of Writing* offered little direct help. The problem is that books like Stewart’s, for all they help us to understand what authenticity means today, have little to tell us about what authenticity meant in the eighteenth century. Consider Thomas Chatterton. For some modern critics, his Rowleian poems are not properly forgeries because he never intended to deceive anyone about their origin—they are works of fiction, not of fraud. They combine a pseudonym with an exotic setting, and are therefore no different from, say, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (published as “a just History of Fact” without “any Appearance of Fiction in it”¹⁰), Swift’s *Gulliver*, or Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*.

Is that, however, what eighteenth-century readers thought about Chatterton? My reading in eighteenth-century sources convinces me it was not, and determining how eighteenth-century Britons thought about forgery and authenticity is the central concern of this book. My approach is therefore resolutely empirical, and from this empirical approach to the subject I derive a resolutely empirical definition of forgery: if contemporaries argued over its authenticity, however innocent we think it today, it is grist for my mill; if they did not, however culpable we think it today, it is not. My only concern is whether the cases were actively debated in the eighteenth century. I mention above that Thomas Warton has been accused of fabrication, but (apart from some cavils by Joseph Ritson) serious doubts arose only late in the nineteenth century. He therefore is of little use for my purposes. I do not pretend to settle for all time the question of what is true and what is false, but I do hope to show that eighteenth-century conceptions of authenticity were not always ours, nor were they necessarily more simplistic than those promulgated by recent critics. The result of this empiricist method is that many matters treated as uniform and uncomplicated by modern critics are shown to have been irreducibly plural in the eighteenth century.

8 Körner, *Fundamental Questions of Philosophy*, p. 140.

9 Wreen, “Is, Madam? Nay, It Seems!,” p. 188.

10 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 1.

I exclude, as far as possible, only two areas of investigation. The first has to do with religious fraud. The libraries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe were packed with arguments over the authenticity of sacred visions, the reliability of Scripture, and the evidence for Christ's divinity. Humphrey Prideaux published the first edition of his popular *True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet* in 1697; a year later John Jeffery published *The Dangerous Imposture of Quakerism*; in 1712 Charles Owen followed them with *The Scene of Delusions Open'd: In an Historical Account of Prophetick Impostures, in the Jewish, Christian, and Pagan World*—titles like these abound. Religious fraud, though, is such a large topic in its own right, and the methods of debating it are so different from investigations into secular deceptions, that it threatened both to take this book in a very different direction and to double its size. I therefore discuss religious questions—Richard Simon's approach to biblical criticism, Hume's critique of miracles—only when they touch directly on the secular cases that are my real concern.

The second and more important exclusion is fiction, the "legitimate" genre in which reality and lies collided most spectacularly in the eighteenth century. This omission demands some justification. Many people throughout history have accused fiction of being indistinguishable from deception, beginning with the lead counsel for the prosecution: Plato leveled the most famous charge against poets, though he was neither the first nor the last to do so.¹¹ Augustine devoted two works to falsehoods, the early *De mendacio* and the later *Contra mendacium*; the preposition in the latter title leaves no doubt where he stands. *De mendacio* offers a taxonomy of eight kinds of lie, each with several sub-types, in which fiction figures; in the end he argues that all are immoral.¹² Aquinas concurs, as do many Renaissance critics anxious about the truth claims made by fiction. And Plato found allies among the Puritans of the seventeenth century. Though most Puritan charges against literature concern the specific immorality it cultivates—Stephen Gosson's concern about the wickedness of the stage led him to write his "pleasaunt inuective against Poets"¹³ in 1587—plenty of critics disparaged fiction itself.

The most lasting reply to these attacks, at least in England, came from a contemporary of Gosson. In *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney cleverly proceeded by redefining truth, and separating higher truth from what we might call mere actuality. It was a bold step, and Sidney's masterstroke was to answer the charges against the poets with a plea of *nolo contendere*: "To the [charge] that they should be the principal liars, I answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar. . . . The poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is

11 See Plato, *Republic*, 2.377d. Aristotle says Solon was the first to make the argument: see *Metaphysics*, 1.2 (983a), and Pindar's *First Olympian Ode*. "By the time of Plato," writes Geoffrey Shepherd, "the debate was a stock theme" (in Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*, p. 199).

12 The only exception: "Jocose lies . . . have never been considered as real lies, since both in the verbal expression and in the attitude of the one joking such lies are accompanied by a very evident lack of intention to deceive" (*De mendacio*, in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Various Subjects*, p. 54).

13 Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse*, title page.

false.” Fiction’s lies are not *real* lies because they do not ask to be taken for true—or, rather, not “true” in any vulgar sense, though they may deliver a higher-order truth in the guise of lower-order falsehood. As Sidney writes elsewhere in the *Apology*, “Though [the poet] recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not.”¹⁴ Literature is somehow outside of, or exempt from, the laws of truth and fiction that govern other situations. The poet makes some kinds of truth claims, but when he relates events “he telleth them not for true.” The class of genres we call imaginative literature somehow invokes a set of quotation marks that serve to insulate its statements from the scrutiny any other claim should expect. Michael Riffaterre says as much when he opens his *Fictional Truth* with the confident assertion, “Fiction is a genre whereas lies are not.... A novel always contains signs whose function is to remind readers that the tale they are being told is imaginary.”¹⁵

The signs are not always noticed. There are probably readers naive enough to believe any story, however preposterous; Swift famously reports on the dimwitted bishop who “hardly believed a word” of *Gulliver’s Travels*.¹⁶ Perhaps we can brush him off as (a) stupid, (b) insane, or (c) an invention of Swift’s, but not every patsy is so easily dismissed. Consider John Langhorne, taken in by Walpole’s *Otranto*. He did not believe in gigantic helmets or sighing portraits, in “Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events.”¹⁷ He did, however, take the story’s stated provenance as true, believing the title page’s declaration that it was by one Onuphrio Muralto, and that caused him to misread the novel. His harsh review of the second edition shows that his credulity was genuine:

When this book was published as a translation from an old Italian romance, ... we could readily excuse its preposterous phenomena.... But when, as in this edition, the Castle of Otranto is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we afforded to the foibles of a supposed antiquity, we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false taste in a cultivated period of learning.¹⁸

Even Walpole’s friend William Mason confessed, “when a friend ... returned it me with some doubts of its originality, I laughed him to scorn.... it proves me your dupe.”¹⁹ Some have suggested Chatterton’s work was no different. Chatterton himself seems to have thought of Rowley as Onuphrio Muralto *redivivus*; Walpole’s dismissal of his Rowleian poems prompted a venomous verse epistle in reply: “Thou mayst call me Cheat—/Say, didst thou ne’er indulge in such Deceit?/Who wrote

14 Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*, pp. 52, 53. Sidney was not the first to advance this line of argument: see, for instance, John of Salisbury’s attack on eloquence: “sed sub verborum tegmine vera latent” (“but truths lie concealed under the veil of words,” *Entheticus maior*, line 186); “Nec ut est in fabulis, quoniam et mendacia poetarum seruiunt ueritati” (*Policriticus*, 3.6.46–7).

15 Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. 1.

16 Swift to Pope, [27] Nov. 1726, in Swift, *Correspondence*, ed. Williams, 3:189; see also *Correspondence*, ed. Woolley, 3:56. Woolley defends the date traditionally assigned to the letter, 17 Nov. 1726.

17 Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 4.

18 *The Monthly Review* 32 (May 1765): 394.

19 Mason to Walpole, 14 April 1765, in Walpole, *Correspondence*, 28:5.

Otranto?”²⁰ Herbert Croft, in writing about Chatterton in 1780, was sympathetic: “in the preface to the first edition of the *Castle of Otranto* ... we are solemnly told that it was found in the ‘library of an antient catholic family.’”²¹ So were the Rowleian poems forgeries, or merely pseudonymous works of fiction?

This sort of anecdotal evidence of incompetent readers, though sparse, is valuable because it shows that not all contemporary readers picked up on the necessary clues. And the problem was not merely with delusional Quixotes—there is evidence that seemingly sane readers addressed letters to Pamela B., as they still do to Sherlock Holmes at Baker Street and even to Romeo and Juliet in Verona (though these correspondents apparently never reached the end of the play; otherwise they would realize the star-crossed lovers are in no condition to reply). And even Swift’s satire—which seems easy to spot as fictional because of its implausibility—is probably clearer to us than to Swift’s contemporaries, who were expected to swallow ludicrous representations of exotic lands in travel narratives, filled with anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.²² The absurdity of flying islands and talking horses may not have been enough to cue some members of Swift’s reading public. We have already seen one reader, proud of his powers of deduction, who “hardly believed a word of it,” while another, more gullible still, supposedly sought in vain for Lilliput on a map. These readers have missed the generic clues that *Gulliver* is to be read not as one would read a news account—that its truth claims, if any, are of a different nature altogether.

Comparisons between fraud and fiction are tempting, and can often be fruitful. They can also, however, be superficial and even specious. Even if we admit, with Lisa Zunshine, that “there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ definition of the truth-value of a given text and no cross-cultural yardstick against which such a value could be measured,”²³ we can still recognize that most readers—an overwhelming majority—did pick up on most of the cues, whatever they were. In 1726, most treated *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* by Lemuel Gulliver as a work of fiction and *A History of the Voyages and Travels of Capt. Nathaniel Uring*, published in the same year, as a work of fact. According to my empirical approach, then, however worthwhile it may be to examine the problematic borderline between novels and histories, fiction need not concern us much here.

That does not, however, mean that we can afford to neglect “literary” language and techniques, and in exploring these cases, I try to pay attention to the metaphors

20 Chatterton, *Complete Works*, 1:341. This poem was first published by John Dix, Chatterton’s biographer and a known forger. Chatterton’s editor, Donald Taylor, summarizes the case: “I am not absolutely sure that [the manuscript] is in C[hatterton]’s hand ... The fact that the poem was first printed by Dix arouses one’s scepticism, but nothing in the poem ... argues against C’s authorship” (*Complete Works*, 2:986). Nick Groom, however, offers both internal and external evidence leading to the conclusion that this is “extremely dubious and should be regarded as [a] forger[y]” (“The Case against Chatterton’s ‘Lines to Walpole’ and ‘Last Verses,’” p. 278).

21 Croft, *Love and Madness*, p. 136.

22 Percy G. Adams wrote the classic account of the “pseudo voyages that were designed to make the public believe them real” (Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars*, p. vii).

23 Zunshine, “Eighteenth-Century Print Culture and the ‘Truth’ of Fictional Narrative,” p. 216.

in which fakery is discussed. Discussions of deception are most often cast in terms of criminal law: the most common analogue is forgery, “the *crimen falsi*,” which Sir William Blackstone defines as “the fraudulent making or alteration of a writing to the prejudice of another man’s right.”²⁴ Another common metaphor is to liken literary deception to monetary counterfeiting. Both metaphors are imprecise, but remain significant: eighteenth-century British thinking about authenticity was often informed by law, and it is possible that legal theory was informed by thinking about authenticity. I have therefore tried to take metaphorical and analogical language seriously.

Organizing this unruly mass of materials has been challenging. I originally considered taking up one episode of deception in each chapter—a chapter on the Popish Plot, another on Mary Toft, and so on. But some of these stories of deception are short and sweet, others long and complicated; some promised to be difficult to stretch out to chapter length, while others seemed to spill into multiple chapters. The Cock Lane Ghost was a celebrated case, and raises enough important questions to warrant a closer examination than it has yet received, but the controversy was over in a matter of weeks. Not so the debates over Ossian. The popularity of the poems and the belief in their authenticity long outlived Macpherson; the arguments raged from the early 1760s until well into the nineteenth century, and are still being played out, in attenuated form, in modern scholarly studies. After much experimentation, then, I settled on a topical arrangement, with each chapter advancing another argument about how debates were conducted. In deciding not to structure chapters around episodes laid out in chronological order, I have given less attention to developments that took place over the course of the eighteenth century—since there seemed to be no tidy narrative of progress during the period, I saw no point in giving priority to chronology. Another result is a degree of repetition. The richer deceptions come up in multiple chapters, while other cases may be mentioned only in passing once or twice. This seemed to me to be warranted by the nature of my material. The Ossianic disputes, for instance, came up in virtually every discussion of deception, and therefore deserve the repeated notice; William Lauder’s effrontery, on the other hand, was striking but, once Douglas demonstrated that his quotations were fabricated, there was little more to say. Readers who hope for straightforward narratives of each episode of deception will be well served by the many other books on the subject.

I have tried to distinguish this study from other works on eighteenth-century forgery in at least three respects. The first, as stated above, is my question: it concerns not the actions of the fakers themselves but the disputes they produced. The second difference is that I have done my best to avoid empty rhetorical questions. Francis Bacon begins his examination of truth by invoking the Gospel of John: “*What is Truth*; said jesting *Pilate*; And would not stay for an Answer. Certainly there be, that delight in Giddinesse; And count it a Bondage, to fix a Beleefe.”²⁵ The study of forgery has attracted many modern jesting Pilates who delight in giddiness, and the rhetorical question is one of their favorite tools. Why is Macpherson’s reworking of the Ossianic stories any worse than Percy’s reworking of his ballad

24 Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 4:245. Baines offers the most extended consideration of the relationships between legal and literary counterfeits in *The House of Forgery*.

25 Bacon, “Of Truth,” in *Essays*, p. 7.

sources? (Implied answer: It's not.) Isn't Chatterton's imagined medieval Bristol just as valid as Walpole's imagined medieval Otranto? (Clear suggestion: It must be.) Why should literary forgery be seen as less ethical than any sort of creative literary representation? (Inevitable conclusion: They're interchangeable.) But these unanswered questions are sometimes disingenuous and always question-begging, assuming a sly wink can take the place of serious explanation. I have done my best not to leave questions hanging in the air.

Most of these rhetorical questions are directed at readers today, and especially at modern notions of how forgeries differ from other kinds of representation. Such questions may be worthwhile, but they are not my concern. Rather than how *we* should think about forgery, I am trying to recover how *eighteenth-century* readers thought about it. That leads to the third area of difference from most previous studies, my method, which I have tried to make resolutely empirical and historical. "Always historicize!" exhorts Fredric Jameson at the beginning of a manifestly ahistorical book.²⁶ I have not hesitated to introduce modern examples and analogues when they promise to illuminate earlier cases, but I have worked to restrict my conceptions of authenticity and forgery to notions that actually circulated in eighteenth-century Britain.

My disdain for the unanswered rhetorical question and my fondness for the historical approach have consequences that may demand justification. If I seem at times to belabor the obvious, as when I discuss the principle of non-contradiction, it is because I hope to make explicit what is often only implied by the participants in the eighteenth-century debates. Often one party in a dispute will be guilty of a logical fallacy, and only by beginning with the basics can the fallacy be identified. It may also be the case that something obvious in the twenty-first century was less so in the eighteenth—not because we have benefited from some inevitable progression from ignorance to enlightenment, but because even conventional wisdom has a history. The kind of historicist argument now taken for granted by every undergraduate was alien to many early-modern sensibilities and, although we may feel embarrassed to dwell on the impossibility of finding eleventh-century events in third-century documents, such things have not always been obvious to all observers.

I have also tried to focus on the arguments actually advanced by the disputants in these cases, rather than offering my own speculations about their ulterior motives. Through much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a favorite mode of examining disputes over authenticity has been to reduce the various perpetrators and critics to bundles of prejudices. According to a favorite modern scenario, a dogmatic Englishman like Samuel Johnson could not possibly admit the Scots had a literary tradition at once greater and older than England's, elitist male physicians could not bear to defer to uneducated women like Mary Toft or Elizabeth Canning on medical matters, and powerful Londoners like Horace Walpole could not tolerate antiquarian posturing from poor provincials like Thomas Chatterton. Much of this work has been valuable in contextualizing the debates and revealing what is at stake, and I do not deny that prejudices of many sorts—nationalist, sexist, racist—influenced many of these discussions. I worry, though, that this line of argument has sometimes been taken too far: if one were to read only recent criticism, it would seem as if no

26 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 9.

eighteenth-century opinion was ever offered in good faith, and no piece of evidence was ever evaluated honestly. My reading in these cases has convinced me that, while not everyone was perfectly disinterested, the Will to Truth was not completely lost in the Will to Power. If the true state of things were so simplistic, there would be no way even to approximate the truth: Scots would always support Scots and Englishmen Englishmen; men would support men and women would support women; and so on. The remarkable fact is that the larger eighteenth-century British public arrived at something like the truth in most of these cases, insofar as we can determine it today. English critics of Ossian may have resented Scottish presumption in “discovering” epics, but they were mostly right that Macpherson had doctored his evidence. Elizabeth Canning’s prosecutors may have been unreformed misogynists, but they were right that her story presented enough difficulties to warrant questioning her. Besides, this sort of argument takes for granted that the set of concerns and prejudices that matter to us must have been determinative in the eighteenth century. We care about race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality, but our understandings of these terms sometimes correspond poorly with eighteenth-century concerns. As Clement Hawes has argued, “The mutual antagonism of England and Scotland . . . is, in fact, ultimately of very limited value as a lens through which to interpret the nuances of ‘Ossian.’”²⁷ I have resolved to look for evidence about, say, Samuel Johnson’s attitudes toward Ossian not in what I can discern about his general attitudes toward Scotland, but in what he actually wrote and said about Ossian.

The book’s argument is that forgery, fakery, and fraud make explicit the usually unspoken grounds on which Britons made sense of their world—confrontations with inauthenticity, in other words, bring tacitly understood conceptions of reality to the surface. To make this case, I have tried to account for some of the involved and drawn-out disputes over things that strike us as absurd now, but that provoked serious debate in the eighteenth century. Why were these fakes not dismissed out of hand?—why did Mary Toft’s imposture require hundreds of pages of learned disquisition?—why did two dozen distinguished literary men line up to avow their belief in William Henry Ireland’s crude forgeries?—how could even learned men accept Psalmanazar as a Formosan? The central argument of *Deception and Detection* is that the era’s remarkable surge of interest in deception is the result of a series of cultural shifts that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that these shifts not only rendered the investigation of deception possible, but made it an urgent task. And the reason many of these questions seem obvious to us today is that we live in a world shaped by the eighteenth century’s struggles with deception: our laws, our philosophy, our history, and our criticism all emerge from the debates considered here. Revisiting those initial skirmishes that helped to shape our modern worldview may help to make some of those disputes more comprehensible. We need to know about them because fakery takes us to the heart of eighteenth-century notions of the value of evidence, of the mechanisms of perception and memory, of the relationship between art and life, of historicism, and of human motivation—deception, in other words, opens up eighteenth-century culture.

27 Hawes, *The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique*, p. 33.