



The Contraband of Hibernia

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The Contraband of Hibernia: the early career of Thomas Moore.

When, in the early 1980s, Anthony Cronin identified Thomas Moore as “the necessary national bard,” he suggested that his work was crucial to the coherent articulation of Irish national identity in the early nineteenth century. This suggestion drew heavily on works like the *Irish Melodies* which encouraged a reading of Moore that was closely tied to his nationality. But this kind of focus overshadows major aspects of his vast and diverse body of work. Yeats, for one, happily dismissed Moore on the basis of the *Melodies*, which were “pretty with a prettiness that is the contraband of Parnassus.” This paper draws attention to the early phase of Moore’s writing career in order to illustrate that this neglected period was formative in shaping his authorial persona, his literary reputation, and his own understanding of authorship. More generally, it proposes that a more nuanced appreciation of Moore’s legacy lies beyond a narrow focus on Irish issues in his work.

[SLIDE] Moore is conventionally pseudonymous in his first volume of original verse, *The Poetical Works of the Late Thomas Little, Esq.* (1801), but elements of his understanding of authorship are also evident in his translation of the *Odes of Anacreon* (1800) and the orthonymous *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems* (1806). When *Little* was published, Moore was already a fashionable figure in London society. *Anacreon*, and its dedication to the Prince of Wales, had succeeded in establishing his *name*, if not yet his poetic reputation. *Little*, a collection comprised of amorous and gently erotic verses, was a very different publication. Selling for seven shillings in octavo format, it was one-third of the cost of the luxurious *Anacreon* quarto, enabling wider distribution to a broader audience. Not only did these aspects of the volume

declare a different bibliographic message to the stately *Anacreon*, but the smaller format enabled its pseudonymous publication. In practice, an author who wished to publish anonymously or pseudonymously was constrained to some degree by the market, since readers who paid a high price for a book expected to be able to identify its author¹. This situation reveals an important point about considerations of anonymous and pseudonymous publication: accounts of authorship cannot be solely subject-centred since authorship is the outcome of a convergence of individuals and institutions in a circuit that includes a variety of social, cultural, legal, economic, and technological forces. The Romantic “age of personality” tends to obscure this state of affairs, and the legal rights that are now enjoyed by authors is one of Romanticism’s enduring cultural legacies. But, by examining Thomas Moore within this authorial circuit, we can see the motivations, means, and consequences of his early pseudonymous works.

Given the sequence of pseudonymous publication, critical disapproval, and consolidation that I describe here, it is tempting to characterise Moore’s initial pseudonymous strategy as a defensive posture that had limited success. While there is some truth to this position, it fails to account for the complexity involved in the choice of pseudonym, the way in which it functions, and the relationship between author and reader that it effects². Instead of capitalising upon the success associated with his name after his translation of *Anacreon*, Moore’s pseudonymous

¹ Lee Erickson uses quantitative methods to examine certain trends and assumptions about originally anonymous poetry publication in the Romantic period, and illustrates this connection between pricing and onymity (256-57). Moore would later experience readers’ dissatisfaction with unidentified authors at first hand: readers of the anonymous poems of the *Keepsake* of 1828 demanded to know the identities of the authors, eventually eliciting compliance from the editors of the following year’s volume. All contributors (including Moore) of the 1829 *Keepsake* were acknowledged (Feldman 287).

² Margaret Ezell argues that to characterise pseudonyms as deliberately covert or fraudulent establishes an antagonistic relationship between author and reader which elides the greater complexity of the authorial situation (‘Reading Pseudonyms’ 15).

publication of *Little* appears more of a reaction against the idea of romantic poetics and its notions of sincerity and authenticity. But an alternative reading of *Little* suggests that Moore's is a more subtle engagement with romantic ideology. This reading depends on viewing Thomas Little as a deliberate and ironic staging of a romantic persona³, rather than a genuine attempt to conceal the true identity of the author. The mask of the prematurely dead Thomas Little is thus a type which readers would recognise as a fiction, and his presence in the paratextual elements of the volume serves to amplify a set of readerly expectations instead of disguising a reticent author⁴. Moore's use of such a mask activates the readers' Coleridgean "willing suspension of disbelief": if they are willing to play along with the masquerade, so is he.

What, then, were Moore's reasons for adopting a pseudonymous persona for *Little*? A dual imperative is involved: part of the persona reveals Moore's understanding and application of ideas of romantic authorship, through the paratextual construction of his persona. Another part of the strategy is addressed explicitly to critics, and is aimed at generating a favourable reception for the volume. Neither aspect is straightforward, however, and the occasionally ironic formulation of authorship collapses this simple distinction.

The pseudonymous strategies of *Little* are evident in the volume's paratexts. [SLIDE] The full title of the volume establishes it as the posthumous publication of a poet's verses, and a preface

³ The sobriquet 'By a Lady' could perform a similar function for constructing generic feminine personae, according to Ezell ('By a Lady').

⁴ Gérard Genette's characterisation of the paratext as a zone of "transaction" (2) is important in identifying the locus of collusion between author and reader with respect to pseudonyms. It is, he argues, "a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2).

by an unnamed editor gives the reader some context about the purported author's life and influences, and the provenance of the works. If a function of the paratext (and particularly the preface) is to hold the reader's attention with "a typically rhetorical apparatus of persuasion" (Genette 198), Moore achieves this by imagining an author who "died in his one-and-twentieth year" (iv). This tragic young bard is a recognisable romantic type, and Moore employs the ludic potential of the paratext in order to create his deceased alter-ego. In one respect, Moore is engaging in romantic poetics by thus setting a biographical context for reading the verse, but he is also communicating to the reader another way in which he wishes to be read: as distant from the work, as though the writer that had composed it were already dead⁵. Readers are invited to participate in a knowingly ironic reading of the volume's authorship and to navigate the ambiguous border between factual declaration and fiction in the preface. It is certainly conceivable that initial readers of *Little* were ignorant of the true author's identity, but a small measure of awareness would have alerted readers to the presence of a calculated artifice⁶.

The opening lines of this preface evoke the private literary coterie in which Little's poems circulated, while setting an apologetic tone for the verse. Here, Moore is providing another key to reading the work, by alluding to the means of textual circulation of amorous precursors of the Restoration period, such as Rochester and Sedley, and the recent (and calculatedly artificial)

⁵ Moore's preface is a (circuitous and) figurative version of Victor Hugo's statement in his preface to *Les Contemplations*: "If an author could have some right to influence the frame of mind of the readers who open his book, the author of *Les Contemplations* would merely say this: this book must be read the way one would read the book of a dead man" (qtd. in Genette 209-10).

⁶ Two points here: as I discuss below, Moore's authorship was soon revealed through official and unofficial channels, so his authorial identity did not remain secret for long. Second, both reader and author anticipate, in almost all circumstances, the unmasking of the pseudonym: "Consequently, no pseudonymous writer can dream of glory without foreseeing this disclosure [. . .], but, reciprocally, no reader who is more or less interested in the pseudonymous author can avoid being exposed to that particular bit of information" (Genette 50).

coterie of the Della Cruscans⁷. But in making these allusions, Moore highlights a crucial difference between textual transmission in coterie and in the literary marketplace: the printed book. In so doing, he enables his paratextual strategising and evokes a different set of literary standards and conventions. First, the paratextual means by which Moore asserts his pseudonymity is intrinsic to the printed book and not to manuscript transmission⁸, and second, the standards to which the verses should be held (in terms of their quality or morality) are different because of the private original site of their composition and circulation. In effect, Moore is creating a fictional context of moral relativism for the verses in *Little*: their amorous and licentious content is acceptable in a consensual coterie environment, but the move from manuscript to print, and from private to public effects a change in their moral status for which the reader should be prepared. In addition, the fact that assuming a name in a literary circle was less a cloaking device than a means of signalling one's membership of a coterie points again to the performative nature of the Thomas Little persona.

After the brief biographical remarks on Little in the volume's preface, the editor embarks on a detailed examination of the respective merits of Ovid, Catullus, and others poets of antiquity that Little "selected for imitation" (xi). This apparently tangential excursion into a discussion of

⁷ Both Rochester and Sedley are mentioned in the preface to *Little*. Daniel Robinson describes the ludic, burlesque, and self-deprecating Della Cruscan *milieu*, and the functioning of pseudonyms within that circle ('Della Crusca').

⁸ As Genette argues, "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (1). And elsewhere, "[paratexts'] separation from the text by the presentational means familiar to us today [. . .] is tied to the existence of the book, that is, the printed texts" (163). I do not mean to suggest that paratexts are entirely absent from manuscript transmission either: I am well aware of the tradition of marginal glosses and annotation that could be described as manuscript paratexts. But these are related more closely to the manuscript *book* than to the characteristic circulation of manuscripts in literary coterie. At any rate, I (and Genette) refer to the paratextual conventions originating from the printed book (title pages, prefaces, dedications), which have few equivalent conventions in the manuscript tradition.

ancient poetic models has in fact a very definite object. In this argument from ancientness, Moore insists on the classical nature of his themes and subjects. Through this approach, Moore positions his work in a particular respectable tradition, and provides the reader with the authoritative context that stands opposed to the humility implicit in the coterie writer who never sought a public audience⁹.

Against this strategy that establishes sincere literary precedents for the verses in *Little*, we must weigh the imagined author's curtailed biography. Early in the preface, the editor writes: [SLIDE] "The particular situation in which [the poems] were written, the character of the author and of his associates, all these peculiarities must be known and felt before we can enter into the spirit of such compositions" (iii-iv), but the analysis of his classical influences dominates the rest of the remarks. Little makes a brief and belated return at the end of the preface, only to allow the editor to contradict his opening statement: "Where Mr. LITTLE was born, or what is the genealogy of his parents, are points in which very few readers can be interested¹⁰" (xii). This elliptical portrait of Little ultimately gives the lie to the ideas of the protective pseudonym and the credulous reader, while simultaneously revealing Moore's disregard for the romantic equivalence of author and legal name. In the context of the appeal that the theatricality of pseudonyms held for Moore, we can read the incompleteness of the authorial fiction as deliberate and ironic, rather than

⁹ Or, as Genette writes of Borges's prefaces, that "coquettish rhetoric of modesty [. . .] the (timid) pride that lies in spectacular humility" (205).

¹⁰ This echoes Moore's treatment of Anacreon's biography in the preface to his debut volume: "The name of his father is doubtful, and therefore cannot be very interesting" (6). But in those "Remarks on Anacreon," Moore makes an illustrative comment about his awareness of readers' identification of authorial character in literary works: "To infer the moral dispositions of a poet from the tone of sentiment which pervades his works, is sometimes a very fallacious analogy: but the soul of Anacreon speaks so unequivocally through his odes, that we may consult them as the faithful mirrors of his heart" (10).

careless or lackadaisical. For in thus masking himself, Moore is not fully disavowing his writings, but rather presenting himself as a literary author (not just a translator) for the first time. For masking oneself is what authors do, and with an increasing self-consciousness in the Romantic “age of personality.” And this is a further irony of *Little*: that in concealing his authorship, Moore is presenting himself as a fully-formed author.

The pseudo-editor, who “writes” the preface and creates a further layer of distance between the text and Moore’s authorship, may be read in two ways. It is a logical necessity for the pseudonymous fiction: the imagined author is deceased and requires an agent to publish his work. The absence of any identifiable biography for the editor has the dual effect of distancing Moore from the text, but also offering the possibility to the enlightened reader that *he is the author*. Again, the lack of biographical detail serves to underline the entire volume’s fictive authorship: the *Little* editor is a performative gesture towards the convention of the fictive preface-writer [think of examples from Scott], but it again draws attention to its artifice by its incompleteness¹¹. However, in the second edition of *Little*, the preface is signed “T. M.” [SLIDE]. While preserving the official fiction, and without explicitly revealing himself, Moore is satisfied to disclose a connection to the work in the form of his apparent editorship. What might seem like a gratuitous abandonment of the pseudonym actually has an established precedent in the commercial market for poetry. Volumes of poetry in the Romantic period were commonly first published without an author’s name, with the poet later revealing his or her identity if the

¹¹ “If an author is going to take the trouble to make up an allographic preface writer, he generally prefers to grant him the solid identity that a name confers [examples]” (Genette 188-9). For contrast, consider the biographical detail conferred on Jedediah Cleishbotham by Walter Scott.

work gains sufficient popularity to remain in print¹². Now more transparent, the official fiction of Thomas Little is more theatrical in proportion. Under these conditions, to disclose Moore as the author of the verses would benefit neither author nor reader, and so the pseudonym, never sincerely intended to conceal the author, remains in place, and crucial to the meaning of the work.

A further paratextual strategy sees the inclusion of self-referential criticism within the preface. The claim that the verses “were written at so early a period, that their errors may claim some indulgence from the critic” (iv) is an autocritical gesture that demonstrates Moore’s awareness of the likely distaste with which the amorous poems would be received by the critical establishment, and also of the contemporary critical tendency to conflate authorial and personal identities. Several reviews addressed these autocritical aspects, suggesting Little was adopted: “with the view, no doubt, of screening the poetry from severe criticism: for who would treat with asperity the defects or errors of a youthful writer after his decease?” (*British Critic* 540). Some agreed with the pseudo-editor’s criticisms, stating that: “Admissions so candid [. . .] render the task of the critic more pleasing.” Here, Moore may claim some success in achieving criticism-by-anticipation, as critics assessed the volume on the terms that he dictated.

In many respects, the event which best encapsulates *Little*’s role in establishing the early reputation of Moore was not a direct response to that volume: it was Francis Jeffrey’s 1806

¹² “Little anonymous poetry of any lasting significance for contemporary readers remained anonymous. [. . .] the survival of a poetic work through three years screens out passing literary fads and indicates at least some merit. When this is done, one immediately observes a signal feature of anonymous poetry publication: if a poem and a poet met with sustained interest over three years, the author would step or be pushed from behind the veil of anonymity to the audience’s applause” (Erickson 249).

Edinburgh Review article on *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems*. This is significant because it soon becomes clear that the review is an assessment not only of *Epistles*, but of the entire career and reputation of Moore to that point [SLIDE]. Jeffrey focuses on the ‘Other Poems,’ which are close in style and amorous themes to those in *Little*, and characterises Moore as “the most licentious of modern versifiers” (456). His crucial accusation of a *conscious attempt* by Moore to impose corruption through his verse is an example of the Romantic ideology that collapses the distinction between authorial voice and personal identity—an ideology against which Thomas Little was, in part, a hedge. For while a critical etiquette prevailed that prevented most critics identifying Moore as author of *Little*, the orthonymous *Epistles* licensed Jeffrey to attribute the apparent immorality of the verse to the personality behind the author. Moore had anticipated the journal influencing his literary reputation when he wrote: “I wait but for the arrival of the *Edinburgh Review*, and then ‘a long farewell to my greatness’ [. . .] I shall vanish and be forgotten” (*LTM* 1:101), but in finding his personal character called into question, he challenged Jeffrey to a duel.

The fallout from the Jeffrey review indicates that the Romantic age was unwilling to acknowledge that the authorial name (Thomas Moore, the writer) might be a similar construct to the pseudonym or fictional persona. Lord Byron provides the best example of the period’s identification of author and person, while his work might also represent the greatest challenge to that orthodoxy. But writers like Charlotte King (and this example from Moore) also help to expose this situation.

With the publication of Longmans' ten-volume edition of Moore's *Poetical Works* in 1840 came the opportunity to re-evaluate and reshape his poetic legacy. Moore seized the opportunity to make revisions to *Little*, dispersing the verses throughout a 'Juvenile Poems' section that undermines the integrity of the original volume and its central pseudonymous persona. The original *Little* preface is reprinted along with a contextual footnote, but the now-redundant editor is dropped. Thirty six complete poems from *Little* are removed; most of which are united by a preponderance of the type of amorous content that attracted most critical attention, and further revisions are made to diminish the passionate content of the remaining poems [SLIDE].

Apparently reflecting on the authorship and reception of the work, to the claim in the original preface that "their author [. . .] wrote as he pleased, careless whether he pleased as he wrote" (iv-v), Moore now added the qualifying phrase "in general" (254). The revisions incorporate the poems into the Thomas Moore canon for the first time, but the "castration of the young Mr Little" (as Moore wrote to his publisher) was undertaken with an eye towards Victorian respectability.

William Hazlitt complained that Moore's pen lacked the feeling of continued identity, and the origin of the effect may be found in these early years. Moore continued to use anonymity and further pseudonyms (Thomas Brown the Younger, Tom Crib) in his work, confirming Gérard Genette's claim that "the pseudonym habit is very much like the drug habit, quickly leading to increased use, abuse, and overdose." Focus on these early works provides a means of reading Moore's diverse body of work from the perspective of his polyonymous understanding of authorship. It reveals the influence of the literary marketplace on shaping his works, and allows a closer examination of Moore's engagement with Romantic ideology (a connection that is often

overlooked). On the whole, it adds nuance to our understanding of a figure whose complexities we have not yet fully explored.

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