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[Review of the book: *Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain* by Jack Lynch]

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## BOOK REVIEW

Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain. *Jack Lynch*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. Pp. xiii+218.

Jack Lynch, one of the true leaders of modern Johnson studies, has produced a very valuable contribution to current scholarship on the important subject of deception and detection in the long eighteenth century. His particular approach, focusing on underlying assumptions about fraud and its debunking, is new, symptomatic of the period's conception of reality, and well grounded in current research and rare primary sources usefully collected in his twenty-page bibliography. So fair-minded as sometimes to resist taking sides in complicated controversies under his discerning scrutiny, Lynch offers a crisply written, well-organized, and comprehensive assessment of the philosophy of criticism surrounding all the major—and much minor—literary fakery roiling the English public of the time.

Two introductory discourses enunciate his emphasis on the cultural forensics of imposture, specifically, the methods used to expose fakery, the rhetoric of disproof, and the modes of argumentation for sifting facts and assertions. Some of the primary reasons for the markedly increased attention to deception in the age lay in the rise of a scientific epistemology, a nascent historical criticism, a more sophisticated legal evaluation of evidence and motive, a prevailing Lockean psychology, and an improving discipline of diplomatics for testing the physical authenticity of documents. Capping the opening remarks is a solid review of modern proponents of fakers—"the exculpatory school" of current critics (3)—for a salutary reminder that the distinction between truth and falsehood, if at times erased today in relativistic theoretical inquiry, was by no means a meaningless opposition in the eighteenth century.

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Chapter 1 concentrates on perhaps the principal example of literary forgery, James Macpherson's publication of bogus English translations of spurious ancient Gaelic poetry attributed to a Scottish bard, Ossian. The complexity of the case is vividly illustrated in the accurate tracing of Thomas Percy's initially anti-*Ossian* stance, then his wavering about authenticity, then his acceptance of *Ossian*, and finally his rejection of the imposture. The vagaries of Percy's response highlight various ways of assessing deception, such as popular affirmation, internal style, supposed examples of sources, and "expert" testimony, none of which proved decisive. Macpherson's calculated vagueness about the "originals" behind his "translations," whether orally transmitted or in manuscripts reaching back to the third century, made detection extraordinarily difficult to establish. Even Jack Lynch at one point seems reluctant to comment conclusively about the matter from a sense of the theoretical impossibility of doing so: "I do not pretend to have settled the Ossianic question; in fact, my thesis is that *we* cannot settle it, at least not by imposing our own answers on the messy realities of the dispute" (30). This is a modest inference, which, if consistent with abstract philosophical considerations of modern reservations about certitude, gives way to the author's well-taken inclination to criticize Macpherson's "chicanery" (108) and "chimerical" historicism later on in the book (180).

Having launched his powerful Ossianic illustration of the intricacies of fraud, Jack Lynch proceeds to dissect, chapter by chapter, the variant eighteenth-century methods of dealing with fakery, such as resorting to ridicule, authorial credentials, the boasted greatness of a work, common-sense norms, and appeals to universal human experience discussed in chapter 2. Chapter 3 unfolds an acute analysis of a crucial evolution in legal evidence, from positive demonstrations of certainty to circumstantial presumptions of epistemic probability reflected increasingly in seventeenth-century English jurisprudence and systematized in Sir Geoffrey Gilbert's *The Law of Evidence* (1754). Epistemic probability was central to empirical inductive intellection at the heart of the pervasive eighteenth-century concern with deception. Chapters 4 and 5 detail internal and external consistency as standards for detecting deception, which, if clear enough to formulate, proved difficult to implement with uniform cogency. This is so for external consistency, "because every attempt to compare a questionable account against the known world raises many epistemological problems" (99). The important point is made about the age's unprecedented ontological openness to new observation as opposed to traditional authoritative testimony discredited by scientific investigation and the acceptance of epistemic probability. And yet a major problem arose in exposing imposture on this new basis: "At what point should a

doubtful new claim be enough to overturn conventional wisdom?" (107). There never would be any set rules for answering this question.

Chapter 6 is an especially enlightening examination of the age's growing historicism, inherited from the Renaissance, feeding the search for anachronism in Richard Bentley's indictment of the pseudoclassical Epistles of Phalaris, in Edmond Malone's critique of William Henry Ireland's Shakespeare forgeries, and in analyses of forgeries by Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton. Chapters 7 and 8 take into account the veracity of testimony and documentary evidence and the myriad fascinating motivations for fraud, as interest in a single ruling passion yielded to a preoccupation with complicated human psychology evident in legal inquiry and contemporary novels. It should come as no surprise in a study on fakery of such consistent excellence that the last chapter, "Different Kinds of Value," provides a splendid finale for the book. It begins by respectfully noting open-ended postmodern conflations of truth and falsehood and concedes that literary worth and authenticity are not always inseparable, as in the case of Chatterton's Rowley poems. But the difference in the two considerations is not of degree but of kind, one consisting of aesthetic judgments and the other defined by historical imperatives. If Jack Lynch cautiously locates a pressing popular demand for authenticity over literary value "at least in eighteenth-century culture," he also happily affirms a perennial human relish for historical truthfulness in literature and life: "The fact is, though, that most people *do* care about such matters, and have for a long time" (174).

Just as the book commences with the *Ossian* controversy, so it concludes with stirring reference to Macpherson's downfall for violating historical truth in opposition to Johnson's most cherished principles as a man, a moralist, and a literary critic: "Poets like Macpherson, though, began to affirm [truthfulness], and therefore left themselves open to accusations that they lied. Insofar as the study of literature is a matter of acquiring objective knowledge about the extra-literary world, it is subject to the kinds of judgments about truth and falsehood that apply outside the literary arena, and forgers' reputations have largely depended on the degree to which they claimed to make objective claims about the real world" (180). Amen. Although, theoretically, it might seem impossible to prove convincingly that something is a fake, "mindless skepticism is no healthier than mindless credulity" (183). Samuel Johnson, so bracingly sound and reassuring in his outlook on humanity, is, as Jack Lynch insists persuasively, a man for all seasons in his fearless and thoroughgoing abhorrence of falsehood in defense of truth, which makes knowledge, civilization, and our survival possible: "Fakery reduces us to a state of perpetual doubt, and teaches us not to trust" (187). This well-fashioned and erudite book is highly

recommended for all scholars, graduate students, undergraduates, and lay readers interested in the insatiable human penchant for fabrication, as it played out unforgettably in the long eighteenth century.

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