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reads

Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period

(University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007)

by Tilar J. Mazzeo ¹

“THIS STUDY sets out to answer ... a deceptively simple question,” writes Tilar Mazzeo in the preface to her study: “What constituted plagiarism in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?” (ix). Arguing against the grain of the critical tradition which, as she reminds us, has for a long time championed labels like “originality” and “genius” to characterise Romantic literature, Mazzeo aims to avoid any such one-sided retrospective qualifications by “getting out of the way and letting the historical evidence speak” (xi). And this very historical evidence, so extensively showcased as her study unfolds, turns out to be enlightening indeed, thoroughly challenging the reader’s beliefs as to what “Romanticism” was all about.

The first major misunderstanding that Mazzeo manages to resolve regards the different standards by which plagiarism is judged at different historical moments. For example, by imposing our own obsession with “linguistic uniqueness and proper citation” (22) on a bygone age, we inevitably create an interpretative distortion, thus disabling ourselves to bridge the gap of history. Also, it might be tempting to condemn a form of behaviour that does not comply with certain ethical norms that seem so familiar and self-evident to our own understanding—tempting but misleading. The best example is none other than Coleridge who was often scolded for his lavish “borrowings” from other writers but who was (in this respect) by no means the “nineteenth-century anomaly” (8) he has been routinely portrayed as.

Mazzeo maintains that, in contrast to both the eighteenth century and post-modern times, “during the Romantic period, plagiarism was primarily concerned neither with textual parallels nor with moral failure” (xiv). Instead, and this is the central argument of *Plagiarism and Literary Property*, repeated throughout the book sometimes to a tiring extent, “the stakes in Romantic-period plagiarism were aesthetic, and the contemporary debates regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy of particular literary obligations masked a larger contest about how to come to critical judgment” (1). In an extremely competitive cultural climate that was marked by frequent critical attacks in the review sections of the widely read periodical journals, a charge of plagiarism seems to have been one of the main instruments that could be and were employed to harm another writer’s reputation. At any rate, very committed “negotiations” (ibid.) took place in this literary arena, focusing mostly on

¹ Mazzeo is Assistant Professor of English at Colby College as well as the author of a fictionalised biography of *The Widow Clicquot* (HarperCollins 2008). Earlier reviews of Mazzeo’s book were published by Margaret Russett (*Wordsworth Circle* 2007), Andrew M Stauffer (*Romanticism* 2008), Daniel Cook (*Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 2008), and Andrew Keanie (*Plagiarism* 2008), among others.

aesthetic questions of style, voice, and “spirit”—elements that were considered crucial when evaluating a work’s inner unity or when judging whether or not an author had “successfully” appropriated from another author.

The distinction between “culpable” and “poetical” plagiarism, introduced by Mazzeo in the first chapter of her study, goes back to De Quincey’s attacks on Coleridge in *Tait’s Magazine* (immediately following the latter’s death in 1834). As will be well-known to most *Bulletin* readers, in the first of a series of essays, De Quincey had absolved Coleridge of borrowing from Milton, Shelvocke, and the Danish-German poet Friederike Brun, but had most emphatically found him guilty of stealing from Schelling in the course of writing the *Biographia Literaria*. In the first three instances, Coleridge is generously excused on the grounds of borrowing unconsciously (Shelvocke), improving the employed materials (Brun), and using a text “as familiar to the ear as nature is to the eye” (Milton).² By contrast, with respect to Schelling, De Quincey speaks of “a case of real and palpable plagiarism”³—and it is this distinction which Mazzeo adopts to great effect. De Quincey’s essay, a text offering “one of the most extensive contemporary discussions available to us” (18-19) in terms of Romantic-period literary ethics, serves as a blueprint for Mazzeo’s own approach, enabling her to differentiate the two general modes of textual appropriation already mentioned.⁴

According to Mazzeo, then, “poetical plagiarism” merely meant “an aesthetic violation of the conventional norms” (2). It was an accusation frequently voiced and usually seen as a symptom of “writing badly” (*ibid.*), signifying a failure to achieve mastery over the borrowed materials, but it did not involve any moral implications. An accusation of “culpable plagiarism”, on the other hand, was comparatively rare because such a case could only be proclaimed if the borrowings “were *simultaneously* unacknowledged, unimproved, unfamiliar, and conscious. In the absence of any one of these elements, culpable plagiarism could not said to have occurred” (*ibid.*).

Ultimately, the application of criteria like “improvement” or “familiarity” is evidently open to interpretation, which is exactly why particular charges of plagiarism created such controversy at the time:

Many of the terms were hotly contested: what, after all, was the threshold of “*improvement*”? Which works formed part of the common literary tradition? [*familiarity*] What texts could a well-versed reader be expected to recognize? [*acknowledgment*] [... What] were the limits of *unconsciousness*? (24; emphasis added)

² See *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 10, ed. Alina Clej (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), 290.

³ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴ It is somewhat disputable whether, during the early nineteenth century, this distinction really was the established notion that Mazzeo makes it out to be when she claims that the two types of plagiarism were “commonly designated” (2) “culpable” and “poetical”, respectively. By wider implication, it could be argued that Mazzeo, via her method of “extrapolation” (3), is guilty of the same kind of revisionism that she criticises in others.

And yet, as Mazzeo demonstrates with respect to a great number of Romantic-period authors, forms of reasoning along these lines were actually very common. For example, although “it was generally accepted that all writers would borrow unconsciously from time to time” (4), not only Coleridge but also P. B. Shelley referred to “unconsciousness” when defending himself against (anticipated) charges of plagiarism (cf. 132 ff.).

Clearly the most important of the aforementioned four criteria, however, was that of improvement. According to Mazzeo (and corroborated by the textual evidence), in order to “improve” upon a text it was sufficient to “transform”, i.e. extend or illustrate, the adopted ideas and make them resonant with your own creation; if an author had met this requirement “no other elements were necessary to defend him from allegations of illegitimate borrowing” (3).⁵

Chapter 2 of Mazzeo’s study is devoted to Coleridge and begins with the just assessment that while his plagiarisms provide the subject-matter for various volumes of criticism, “neither the constructions of plagiarism nor of the unconscious, as Coleridge and his Romantic contemporaries might have understood these terms, have been scrutinized” (17-18). A concise account of De Quincey’s 1834 accusations is followed next by Mazzeo’s beautiful meditation on “the Psychology of the Romantic Habit” which comes to the conclusion that Coleridge plagiarised “‘unwillingly’ rather than ‘unknowingly’” (26), i.e. “unconsciously” in his own terms.

This condition is echoed in *Christabel*, a poem that “explores the ways that the voice of the other and the voice of the self may coincide and counterinhabit each other” (35). Coleridge in fact advocated this principle (cf. his famous remark in BL I 164: “I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist”) and saw it as quite distinct from plagiarism: To him, “plagiarism represented an ‘incongruity of style’ and an inability to infuse the text of another with the authorial voice. Its opposite is ventriloquism: when, through mastery and projection, one voice speaks through two bodies and two texts” (42). Here we have the same concern with textual unity and a consistent authorial subjectivity that Mazzeo sees as characteristic of the Romantics’ treatment of plagiarism in general. Consequently, many works of postmodern literature, intentionally disrupted and full of “intertextuality”, would probably have “horrified” (47) Coleridge and his contemporaries—and effected charges of (at least “poetical”) plagiarism.

What is mostly ignored by Mazzeo, however, is the degree to which Coleridge’s statements on the plagiarism question were usually highly ambiguous.⁶ “His hypocrisy has been overstated”, she judges with regard to

⁵ Conversely, texts that included unimproved materials from the writings of others were perceived as “monstrous, patchwork, or unassimilated” (3).

⁶ All attempts at interpreting his practice of plagiarizing along the lines of the “ventriloquism” concept are tantamount to allowing Coleridge to lead us up the garden path. As with McFarland’s “mosaic organization”, such rhetorical manoeuvres can never account for the massive “borrowings” from Schelling in the *Biographia* where Coleridge does not even come close to any kind of “successful ventriloquism” (44).

his own accusations of others (42), and even the most sympathetic reader wonders whether she does not exculpate Coleridge all too willingly.

In chapter 3, Mazzeo deals with issues of genre and gender and discusses a range of writers as diverse as Mary Robinson, “Monk” Lewis, and James Hogg. In addition to works that were defined as pronouncedly “literary”, in the early nineteenth century texts written in “subliterary” genres also enjoyed great popularity (e.g. travel narratives, histories, ballads, and folktales)—and these were especially prone to being appropriated from because they were seen as “implicitly authorless” (51). Since “gender and genre often were intimately connected” (ibid.), it was women authors in particular who were prone to become the victims of such supposed peccadilloes. The most interesting case is probably that of Dorothy Wordsworth whose journals, as is well known, were a constant source of inspiration for the male members of her circle. Although she agreed to this procedure it must not be overlooked that she was bound by social conventions that did not allow her to think of herself of a fully-fledged author in her own right (cf. 62 ff.).

Mazzeo’s observation that “the judgment of improvement in respect to a woman’s text” was evidently in most instances “a foregone conclusion” (56) is particularly revealing in terms of the ultimate “exclusion of women from Romantic literary culture, its competitions, and its stakes” (54). With Coleridge’s borrowings from Brun’s Chamonix poem in view, she correctly asserts that “De Quincey treats the improvement as obvious and dismisses the charges in a brief paragraph; the obligation was never the subject of an extended ... discussion elsewhere” (ibid.). Romantic-period plagiarism, it must therefore be noted, was primarily an all-male affair, “a charge leveled by one gentleman against another” (50).⁷

The intellectual debts of one such gentleman, namely Lord Byron’s obligations in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto 3, constitute the principal part of the next chapter of *Plagiarism and Literary Property*. Here, Mazzeo manages to bring home her message in the most convincing way when she ably demonstrates that the controversies around Byron’s plagiarisms formed nothing less than “a sustained ... attack on his reputation as a poet, ... revealing the extent to which accusations of plagiarism represented a mode of criticism in the Romantic period” (86). Indeed, Byron’s rather playful way of working with sources was not always popular with his contemporaries. This applies especially to Wordsworth who detected an uncanny proximity in tone between parts of *Childe Harold* and his own *Tintern Abbey* and asked Henry Taylor to give “Lord B.” the “severe chastisement” (95) that he deserved, which Taylor duly administered in the *London Magazine* in 1823. Resentment at the frequent “feudal overtones” (121) of Byron’s behaviour is more than obvious in critiques like Wordsworth’s; the “Lake Poet” must have felt that

⁷ It is also enlightening to be reminded of the simple, sad fact that a writer like Mary Shelley was completely dependent on the “courtesy” of her husband when it came to the rights of intellectual ownership to a work like *Frankenstein* (52).

“while he toiled with nature, working the imaginative landscape of the mind and creating new sensibilities, Byron declined similar intellectual labors. Thus, Wordsworth’s animosity in his indictment of Byron reflects deeply personal concerns and genuine outrage” (96).⁸

Unlike his aristocratic friend, positively “the Romantic figure whose intellectual debts were most familiar to his contemporaries” (86), P. B. Shelley was never publicly charged with any concrete instances of plagiarism during his lifetime. Being very sensitive to the subject, Shelley attempted to preclude potential accusations in this vein by attaching prefaces to some of his major poetical works in which he pointed out correspondences and, on a more theoretical level, “emphasized an aesthetic engagement with metaphors of absorption, digestion, and appropriation” (133). In Mazzeo’s estimation, he thereby “successfully negotiated contemporary attitudes toward literary property” (122). Shelley’s awareness of the impossibility of avoiding his literary forebears’ and coevals’ influence shines through, for instance, when, in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, he declares that poetry per se “creates by combination and representation” (135), or when he invokes a Hazlittian “spirit of the age” that “neither the meanest scribbler, not the sublimest genius of any era, can escape” (134).⁹

Also in chapter 5, Mazzeo treats her readers to an exemplary debate on “aesthetic plagiarism” that involved Shelley’s wife, Mary, and Thomas Love Peacock. In *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), Peacock harshly criticises the tendency in “modern” (i.e. Romantic) poetry to awkwardly incorporate elements from popular travel accounts and exploration narratives—with the resulting text often appearing “monstrous: a work that is composed of parts that remain grotesquely and incongruously distinct” (127). Mary Shelley, on the other hand, in her 1823 review essay on *Giovanni Villani*, claims for the same type of literature “a unique form of textual unity” (128) in which the “sensibilities of the individual writer permeate the style and tone of the entire production” (129). Here, authorial subjectivity, the “guiding voice” (ibid.) exerting mastery over the borrowed materials, once again emerges as a seminal factor in early nineteenth-century critical disputes on questions of textual appropriation.

The last chapter of Mazzeo’s study is dedicated to a discussion of the interrelation of literary property and class issues. It mainly concentrates on Wordsworth who was particularly anxious about attempts of “trespassing” on the “figurative ‘estate’” represented by his literary creations (146). Thus, he proved to be less than amused when in 1803 a certain Peter Bayley satirised the

⁸ Other charges against Byron included borrowings in his ‘Lara’ (from Voltaire, Ann Radcliffe, et al.), ‘The Siege of Corinth’ (from *Christabel*), and *Don Juan* (from Dalyell’s *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea*); cf. 87 ff. and 107 ff., respectively.

⁹ In *A Defence of Poetry* and the preface to ‘The Revolt of Islam’, respectively.

Lyrical Ballads (cf. 147 f.),¹⁰ or when he was himself accused of having plagiarized from Landor's *Gebir* in *The Excursion* (cf. 158 ff.). As we have seen in the context of his reactions to Byron, the question of literary ownership had very direct material implications for Wordsworth: he felt it necessary to "demarcate and preserve" the "imaginative landscape" he had created (157) and became "actively involved with parliamentary efforts to reform copyright" (165) for the same reason.

Finally, authors like Ann Yearsley and John Clare, "actual laboring-class poets" (173) that is, were also regularly charged with plagiarizing—from works of the literary tradition that, as Mazzeo makes clear, they could hardly have even read at the time they composed their own poems. Although a certain degree of conscious self-fashioning must be conceded (Hannah More portrayed Yearsley as "an unlettered bard and natural genius" (174), while Clare was regularly celebrated for his "authenticity"), the strict Georgian class system effectively excluded these writers from any real participation in the literary marketplace. Hence, Yearsley laments her estrangement "from Science and old Wisdom's classic lore" (175), and Clare, in a similar expression of mildly self-ironic regret, writes to Allan Cunningham in 1824:

I should suppose, friend Allan, that "The Ettrick Shepherd" [James Hogg], "The Nithsdale Mason" [Cunningham], and "The Northamptonshire Peasant" [Clare himself], are looked upon as intruders and stray cattle in the fields of the Muses. (179)

Even though among Romantic-period authors Mazzeo's book deals most elaborately with Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Byron, the inclusion of the popular "subliterary" genres, of related public discourses (like gender and copyright), and of rather marginal figures like Yearsley, Clare, or Hogg makes it exactly the comprehensive (albeit concise) study of early nineteenth-century plagiarism and print culture that it aims to be. Sometimes a little too rigid in its composition—the various materials are presented (and probably were selected) too discernibly for the single purpose of illustrating the persistently-repeated premises—, this "avowedly historicist project" (x) nevertheless succeeds in its central intention of questioning some traditional assumptions about the realities of Romanticism. Most memorably, Mazzeo reveals that charges of plagiarism were a major parameter in contemporary literary criticism and that it was primarily an aesthetic instead of a moral issue: more about "writing badly" than about any truly "culpable" conduct.

The other side of the coin is that by expressly *not* writing "a book about guilt or innocence" (ix), Mazzeo remains very much on the surface of things when it comes to the (nevertheless important) psychological dimensions of

¹⁰ The role played by satirical works in Romantic-period debates about plagiarism is repeatedly addressed in Mazzeo's book—the bottom line being that authors of satire, surprisingly if seen from a present-day perspective, were oftentimes charged with (albeit "poetical") plagiarism; see e.g. 14 ff.

plagiarism.¹¹ Besides, it is hard to fully appreciate one of her initial arguments, viz. that not only should we reconsider the role of “autogenous originality” (passim), the emphasis on which was “only later ascribed to Romanticism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship” (16), but also allow for “models of coterie or collaborative authorship” (ix) that have been ignored so far in favour of the concept of the “solitary genius.” It is true that after reading *Plagiarism and Literary Property*, it can hardly be denied that “in the classroom, we hold our undergraduate students to higher standards of ex nihilo originality than those to which the Romantics ever held each other” (187). As their preoccupation with plagiarism suggests, writers of the period were somewhat obsessed with originality, but they had different criteria for measuring it and, as Mazzeo illustrates, were just as invested in “textual strategies of assimilation, absorption, and appropriation” (5). The subject-matter of collaboration, however, is (despite the side note on Dorothy Wordsworth’s “coterie writing”) distinctly beyond the scope of Mazzeo’s study, and its invocation seems to serve mainly as a finger exercise in fashionable critical vocabulary.

What instead emerges most clearly from a reading of this book is almost the opposite of the harmony conjured up by the term “collaboration”, namely a sense of the tremendous competitiveness displayed in the literary periodicals of the era, of exactly the “merciless ... cannonading” that Coleridge complained of in the *Biographia* (BL I 50). It is not surprising that, in a climate like this, writers would anticipate charges of plagiarism and struggle to defend themselves even before they were actually accused—as in the case of Coleridge whose conflicting statements on the topic continue to baffle us to this day.¹²

¹¹ The notable exception is the chapter on Coleridge with its reflections on the role of habit, elaborated upon in Mazzeo’s earlier essay in *European Romantic Review* 15 (2004) 2, 335-341.

¹² For further reading on related topics, see Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Nick Groom, *The Forger’s Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (Picador, 2002); and Marilyn Randall, *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power* (Toronto University Press, 2001). Also, Jack Stillinger provides an interesting account of Coleridgean echoes in Keats’s poetry in his *Romantic Complexity* (University of Illinois Press, 2008, 46 ff.).