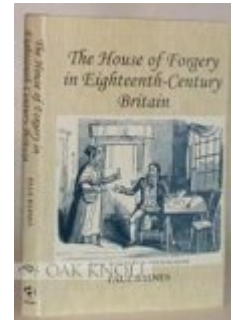


Paul Baines. *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* Aldershot, Hants, and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1999. viii + 195 pp. \$68.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84014-601-1.



Reviewed by Randall McGowen

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It sometimes seems as if eighteenth-century Britain was obsessed with the problem of forgery. The crime commanded the attention of the public and authorities to an unparalleled extent. It also produced some of the century's most celebrated episodes and notorious scandals. Authors battled over the authenticity of scripture, while political polemicists scattered charges that works by Charles I and Milton were frauds. Pope employed the accusation of forgery against his literary and political opponents, while Johnson contested the claims made for Ossian. At the same time, forgery rose to peculiar prominence as a crime, becoming the subject of frequent Parliamentary legislation. More disturbing still, several hundred forgers perished at the gallows. The cases of the Perreau brothers and Dr. Dodd transfixed a public that might otherwise have given its attention to colonial unrest.

Paul Baines believes that this preoccupation with forgery is worth investigating. It may, he suggests, cast new light on the character of that society, especially on crucial transformations in the nature of literary activity. In order to yield its se-

crets, Baines argues, two seemingly distinct categories of forgery must be brought together. "This book," he writes, "attempts to correlate the two components of the phrase 'literary forgery' by examining, with as near equal weight as is possible, criminal cases alongside literary ones" (p. 3). Baines seconds Horace Walpole's observation that "all of the house of forgery are relations" (p. 3). His goal, in this demanding interdisciplinary study, is to uncover these relationships, looking for the unexpected connection or indirect influences.

Baines examines an impressive range of sources, including works on "criminal law, economic argument, textual scholarship and authorial property legislation" (p. 4). Dense legal treatises as well as the many lives of prominent forgers published during these years come under review. He patiently reconstructs for us some of the legislative history of the offense. These are not the usual concerns of a literary scholar. Few social and legal historians have been as thorough in dealing with the crime. He has even surveyed the Old Bailey Sessions Papers in order to track down

every prosecution of the crime in London between 1715 and 1780. The results of this investigation are nicely summarized in the tables and graphs in the appendix.

A conviction for forgery was more likely to carry an offender to the gallows than for any other property offense. Yet all this toil in the legal records does not yield as much as it might. His explanation for the seriousness with which the offense was treated is conventional. "'Forgery' became a threat because those new monetary arrangements themselves threatened basic ideas of value, and the security of human exchanges and interactions" (p. 11). It "represented," he writes, "the fear and risk involved in new economic paradigms and mechanisms" (p. 8). Baines does little to elaborate on these sweeping claims. He is more interested in using the grim spectacle of the execution of a forger to add color to his discussion of literary forgery than he is in defining more carefully the chronology or character of this uneasiness.

Not surprisingly, Baines's main concern is with the role of forgery in constructing particular kinds of authority in literature. His focus is on such familiar figures as Pope, Johnson, and Chatterton. Having once established that the crime was dealt with severely, Baines turns to a careful and nuanced interpretation of the ways in which charges of forgery figured in literary controversy over the century. For instance, Pope was particularly free in his use of forgery as a way of pillorizing his enemies. He also employed the charge to compose savage satires on the Hanoverian state and the financial interests who benefitted from it. Pope presented "a general criminalization of literary practice" (p. 46).

The consequences for literature were great. The "detection of forgery," Baines argues, "continued powerfully to enhance authenticity, helping to characterize the literary work as personal, vulnerable, and needing the protective identity of an authorized corpus" (p. 44). By Johnson's time the

transformation was almost complete. "Forgery figured as a crime against an authorial integrity which it also helped to define" (p. 41). This vital change was facilitated by the relationship between literary controversy and the alarm arising out of the crime. The language of the latter occurrence infected these disputes. They were "written in court language... They were solid with criminal analogies" (p. 92).

As one instance of this coincidence, Baines points to the parallel between the argument over proof of handwriting at a forgery trial and the dispute over literary style as a way of establishing authorship. In the one case the authorities resolved that despite the appearance of the variability of an individual's writing, each person possessed a distinctive hand. In the other critics came to the conclusion that careful study could provide an infallible guide the unique style of an author. It is precisely the overlap between these two discourses that Baines hopes will enrich and complicate our understanding of literary activity in the eighteenth century.

For all of his enthusiasm and industry, and despite the considerable amount of new material he has discovered, it remains difficult to assess the importance of this book. Baines seeks to write an interdisciplinary work, yet his study demonstrates how problematic such an endeavor is. He has examined the sources historians use, but he has not familiarized himself with the questions historians ask. Much of his analysis, the most careful and sophisticated readings, are reserved for the literary materials. The offense of forgery receives a cruder treatment. For example, the chronological limits of the book are defined by literary figures. It would have looked rather different if the offense had played a larger role in the organization of the work. The years between 1688 and 1729 would have appeared more puzzling, and the actual episode that produced the important statute of the latter year would have demand-

ed more attention. His study certainly would not have ended in 1780.

The issue of forgery assumed a different but equally urgent appearance during the years of the suspension of cash payments between 1797 and 1822. These questions of chronology are not trivial; they go to the heart of the matter. Baines makes much of the coincidence of a concern with forgery in legal and literary affairs. If the match is less perfect than he suggests, it calls into question his argument about what the supposed relationship tells us about eighteenth-century society. A more careful study of the legal record reveals that there may be less here than meets the eye.

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