The idea of the Romantic poet's hallmark as genius -- the idiosyncratic, imaginative, personally unique creative expression of conceptions and feelings -- might seem to contradict the idea of the Romantic poet as forger. This book makes a compelling and well documented argument for the influence of Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) on Oscar Wilde. Chatterton, a youthful genius who forged poetry and killed himself at age 18, was arguably the earliest English Romantic poet, and some of Wilde's creative and critical writings embrace and enact both Romanticism and forgery. But the case for Chatterton's influence on Wilde entails more than what they had in common. Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell base much of their argument upon the important document that comprises their Appendix A, an edition of Oscar Wilde's "Chatterton" notebook, kept in the mid-1880s and now in the collection of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. According to Bristow and Mitchell, respectively editor of The Picture of Dorian Gray (OET, 2005) and co-editor of Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside (2012), "the 'Chatterton' notebook inspired many of the remarkable shifts that took place during the mid and late 1880s in Wilde's evolving emergence as a major fin-de-siècle author" (21).

This book makes a distinctive and important intervention in Wilde studies by refuting the usual dismissive interpretation of Wilde's "Chatterton" notebook, which looks like a collection of largely second-hand material. Along with Wilde's critical observations, it contains notes based on an essay by a literary critic, Theodore Watts, and many cut-and-pasted pages from David Masson's and Daniel Wilson's Victorian critical biographies of the poet in addition to connecting notes drawn from those sources. For this reason, Bristow and Mitchell observe, "several commentators have jumped to the bleak conclusion that the excerpts from the aforementioned critical volumes remain incontrovertible evidence of [Wilde's] supposedly habitual, and thoroughly shameful, plagiarism" (17). Wilde allegedly plagiarized this material in two lectures on Chatterton, the first on 24 November 1886 at the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution and the second in Bournemouth on 7 April 1888; he might also have re-used the material in an essay on the poet that he had agreed to write for the Century Guild Hobby Horse -- but it never appeared.

Bristow and Mitchell read the notebook quite differently. Instead of accepting the judgments of scholars and editors who have found it full of borrowings and dismissed its importance, they conducted a thorough and wide-ranging investigation of its text and of the literary and biographical contexts, including the life, works, and critical reception of Chatterton, 18th- and 19th-century literary forgery and plagiarism, Wilde's realization of Chatterton's influence, Wilde's use of notebooks, and the ongoing influence of Chatterton on Wilde's work after 1886.

This book scrupulously describes the physical notebook and its arrangement of text and cuttings, appropriately illustrated with photographic images of sample pages. In accounting for their transcription and editorial practices, Bristow and Mitchell note that Wilde's handwriting here "is marvelously readable" (not always the case in other notebooks). They could also check their work against another transcription, that of Geoff Dibb, who included it in Oscar Wilde, a Vagabond with a Mission: The Story of Oscar Wilde's Lecture Tours of Britain and Ireland (2013). Besides correcting Dibb's transcription, Bristow and Mitchell improve on his work by much more clearly representing in print the look of the notebook pages, preserving the length and position of Wilde's holograph lines, and printing the pasted-in cuttings in alternative typefaces. Bristow and Mitchell also provide excellent textual and contextual annotations for both Wilde's remarks and for the sources used by Chatterton's biographers, Wilson and Masson, from whose books Wilde cut and pasted numerous passages.

Bristow and Mitchell also reckon with the recent neglect of Chatterton himself. Though Victorians knew enough about Chatterton's notorious life and celebrated works to be interested in viewing imagined images of his suicide, reading his poetry, going to lectures about him, and reading biographies and criticism, his life and works have commanded less and less recognition among literary academics or students in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While new editions appeared in the earlier twentieth century and Peter Ackroyd's sequence of novels, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983) and Chatterton (1984), suggests comparative study of the two writers, the academy has largely forgotten the boy genius. As Bristow and Mitchell point out, "Chatterton has never made an appearance in all nine iterations of the most comprehensive of college anthologies of British literature from W. W. Norton" nor does he appear in the Longman or Broadview anthologies (313-14).
To account for the Victorians’, and especially Wilde’s, interest in Chatterton, the authors provide two chapters, more than 100 pages, about Chatterton’s brief life and legendary reputation. They highlight the production and publication of his poems, especially the pseudo-Chaucerian verses he penned on antique vellum and circulated as if they were the newly discovered work of a late-medieval priest from Bristol, Thomas Rowley. In his own brief lifetime, the poems drew both admiration and condemnation, and in the 115 years between his death and Wilde’s lecture, this controversy continued in editorial and critical reception of his work. As Bristow and Mitchell demonstrate, Chatterton’s legendary reputation grew from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Long after Herbert Croft referred to Chatterton in his sensational murder novel, *Love and Madness* (1780), he was adopted as a poetically powerful precursor by a succession of notable poets: by English Romantics like Wordsworth (who, in “Resolution and Independence,” coined the epithet, “marvelous boy,” for him), Keats (who dedicated “Endymion” to him), Shelley, and Southey; by Victorians such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti; and by French Romantics like de Vigny and Gautier. In describing the growth of Chatterton’s reputation “as either an intrinsically mad or formidably gifted genius” (85), Bristow and Mitchell highlight the Royal Academy 1856 exhibition of Henry Wallis’s dramatically imagined and romantically colorful representation of the poet’s suicide in a Holborn garret with a torn-up manuscript and a vial of poison on the floor next to his body:


The painting excited many famous viewers, including Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, and John Addington Symonds; it contributed significantly to the continuing fascination with Chatterton, provoking painted copies and photographic imitations. Thomas Hardy and Wilkie Collins mentioned him in novels, and Lewis Carroll’s verse in “Jabberwocky” provided a whimsical send-up of Chatterton’s pseudo-Chaucerian vocabulary (90). Wallis’s painting also provided the scenic inspiration (see below) for a popular one-act play, *Chatterton* (1884), which starred an acquaintance of Wilde’s, Wilson Barrett:

According to Bristow and Mitchell, Wilde’s notebook is the earliest manifestation of his “enthusiastic participation in a widespread late Victorian commitment to revering Chatterton [as] the presiding spirit of English Romanticism” (15). To show how Wilde’s interest in Chatterton may have flowered as he studied Rossetti’s *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881), Bristow and Mitchell construct a complex and persuasive account of the various biographical and literary paths from his time at Oxford to his lecture on Chatterton. Besides a sonnet on Chatterton that Wilde copied over into his notebook, he also took notes from it on “[f]ive unnumbered, undated, handwritten foolscap sheets” (330) reproduced here as Appendix B. In thus devoting himself to Chatterton, Wilde embraced Romanticism as an artistic movement and as an idea opposed to Classicism. Wilde knew the literary critical debates about Romanticism, especially Walter Pater’s defense of it (in “Romanticism” [1876]) against a “Tory polemic” by William John Courthope; Pater’s defense, the authors suggest, “held particular resonance for Wilde” because it “refocuses the debate about the origins of the long-standing opposition between the Romantic and the classical” (135). In contending that “the ‘romantic spirit’ was an ‘ever-present, an enduring principle in the artistic temperament,’ just like the ‘classical’” (136), Pater is said to have confirmed Wilde’s developing theory of art as he composed his poems as well shaped a critical perspective at Oxford and after. According to Bristow and Mitchell, the Romantic spirit of poetry is manifest in Wilde’s lifelong devotion to Keats, which led him to write poems and essays honoring his poetic paragon. “In the mid-1880s,” the authors write, “Wilde knew how to discuss the links between Keats’s life story and his brilliant art, just as he could grasp Rossetti’s position as an heir to Keats. He was also poised to acknowledge the leadership that Chatterton gave to both of these great writers as the ‘father of the Romantic movement’” (149).
Wilde's critical appreciation of Chatterton grew significantly when he read Theodore Watts's perceptive essay on him as well as the selection of his poems in T. H. Ward's *The English Poets* (four volumes, 1880). Correcting previous misattributions, Bristow and Mitchell show that Wilde did not compose a significant portion of notebook entries that actually transcribe or paraphrase Watts's argument for understanding Chatterton's forgeries as prompted by "artistic conscience / which is truth to Beauty" (qtd. 179). However, the editors argue, "[the] main consequence of attributing these notes to their proper source is that it shifts the interpretive interest away from Wilde's apparent passion for the inherent criminality of artistic theft, toward the genealogy of echoes and emulation that Watts informatively traced back to its progenitor, Chatterton" (181). As they tellingly cite evidence like this against the dominant charge that Wilde plagiarized, Bristow and Mitchell demonstrate that Wilde used his "Chatterton" notebook as a compendium of research, some of which he clearly quoted in his lecture, as newspaper accounts of the Bournemouth occasion confirm. But as Bristow and Mitchell observe, the notebook is far too lengthy to have been read out verbatim to a lecture audience, as some critics alleging plagiarism have asserted (211). Further, the editors argue, "Wilde's studied interest in understanding the life and works of Chatterton forms the foundation for his staggeringly original approaches to literary criticism and fiction" (212).

Were they indeed staggeringly original approaches? For the first time, Bristow and Mitchell claim, Wilde's research for the "Chatterton" notebook research caused him to grasp "the paradoxical links between the creation of unsurpassed beauty and unrepentant acts of fabrication: not just creating forgeries but also fabricating lies, performing roles, and donning masks" (214). But critics have remarked on these links for decades, advancing several theories of criminality and aesthetics to account for Wilde's thematic tendencies. Also, Wilde showed symptomatic interests in criminality and creativity well before he did his research for the notebook. For example, in his Poems (1881), for the 1881 staging of *The Masque of Herriman*, the transgressivity of forgery and fabrication focuses the sonnet "Helas," and the enraptured title character of the narrative poem "Charmides" transgresses by invading the temple of Athena and making love to the statue of the goddess. Likewise, Wilde's research notebook for *Historical Criticism* (1878-79) reveals his fascination with the link between crime and creativity in ancient Rome and the Renaissance. This notebook contains two pages on Tacitus and the "psychological interest in crime what seems so say inherent in the Italian nature" that "is essentially intellectual and yet it is too analytical to be really healthy--which appears in Suettusio and Procopius and the herd of scandal-mongers of the imperial court--which Danlé [sic] had in an extreme sense, and which made Cellini write his biography and Burchard and Infessura their memoirs" (*Historical Criticism Notebook* [Oxford UP 2016] 126).

These references show that Wilde thought about criminality and creativity well before he did his research for the "Chatterton" notebook. Nevertheless, Bristow and Mitchell make a compelling case for the catalytic effect of Chatterton's forgeries on Wilde's creative and critical imagination. They shed new light on the essays titled "Pen, Pencil and Poison" and "The Decay of Lying" (1889, rev. 1891), as well as on the stories collected in *The Happy Prince, and Other Tales* (1888) and *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891). For example, they credit Chatterton with inspiring Wilde's account of Thomas Wainewright, the notorious forger and murderer who also wrote essays of art criticism; using Wainewright to exemplify "how the deft criminality of forgery spins the brilliant creativity of art" (222), Wilde argues that "[t]he fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (*Complete Works, Vol. 4: Criticism* [Oxford UP 2007] 121). But if Wilde's account of Wainewright owes much to Chatterton, the marvelous boy deserves less credit for Wilde's stories and for concept of narrative art that he forges from "representational deceptions, fabrications, and fictions" (234) in "The Decay of Lying." These other pieces may have been influenced by Wilde's notebook research, but it does not explain them.

Bristow and Mitchell devote an entire chapter to exegesis of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," using the expanded version -- unpublished in Wilde's lifetime -- because it shows more indebtedness to the notebook and the historical contexts of literary forgery since the 1790s, especially fake Shakespearian work. The story, they claim, "combines the criminal impulse that fuels creativity in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" with the esteemed acts of fabricating the truth that Vivian lauds in "The Decay of Lying"" (246). They also see the story as a continuation, with a crucial revisionary contradiction, of the argument Wilde had made in "Shakespeare and Stage Costume" (1885), reprinted with revisions and an important concluding addition in "The Truth of Masks" in *Intentions* (1891). But from "The Truth of Masks" Bristow and Mitchell quote only the first two sentences of the coda in which Wilde remarks, "Not that I agree with everything I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree" (*Criticism* 228). This suits their argument but it ignores the full force of the addition, which is famous for stating Wilde's philosophical assumptions underlying the revised title: "A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" (*Criticism* 228).

Though Bristow and Mitchell thus ignore the fullest implications of Wilde's Platonic and Hegelian idealistic philosophical foundations for "art-criticism," their sharply focused approach combines literary scholarship and close reading with excellent results. They show that Wilde's story of the boy actor Willie Hughes, imagined as Shakespeare's inspiration for the sonnets, springs from Wilde's interest in a Romantic ideal of male beauty, of artistic creation as forgery, and of male homoeroticism "as a stigmatized form of desire that has throughout cultural history inspired the finest art" (290). They tellingly note that just as Wilde's notebook calls Chatterton "the father of the Romantic movement in England," the narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." remarks that "the Romantic Movement of English Literature is largely indebted" to Willie Hughes (290). For Bristow and Mitchell, Wilde's story also reflects the history of Chatterton's impact on Romanticism: "the theory of "W. H." that developed in the eighteenth century," they write, "generated in Wilde's expert story an exemplary Shakespearean forgery that remains faithful to the decidedly 'Romantic' tradition that the 'marvellous Boy' Chatterton had begun" (292).

Bristow and Mitchell conclude by comparing the reputations of Wilde and Chatterton in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including a wrap-up of Wilde's final allusions to Chatterton as well as his uses of forgery and faked identity, notably in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in the Bunburyists of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They mention but make nothing of the fact that Wilde himself adopted the false identity of Sebastian Melmoth on his release from Reading Gaol in 1897, and in their focus on Wilde's artistic choices, they reject overarching biographical interpretations of Wilde such as Richard Ellmann's.

Overall, this book makes a major contribution to studies of Wilde. Rather than discounting his work, as some critics do, as clever work-for-hire, it takes his writing seriously as both art and criticism connected by his own carefully considered aesthetic theory and practice. For the benefit of readers and scholars this book scrupulously transcribes, annotates, and curates both Wilde's "Chatterton" notebook and his notes on Rossetti. In doing so as well as in explaining how Chatterton influenced Wilde, this volume deepens our understanding of Wilde's place in the context of literary and cultural history.