THE CLEVER DULLARD

William Henry Ireland was a dullard. That, at least, is what everyone always told him. Born of dubious parentage in 1775 to London engraver and antiquarian Samuel Ireland, William was a muddleheaded boy who was unable to apply himself at much of anything.

He was sent home from one school holding a note to his father explaining that William was simply too stupid to be taught, and that to collect any further tuition fees "was little better than robbing Mr. Ireland of his money."

William spent so little energy on the outside world because his inner world was simply more interesting. Freed from any expectations of greatness from his family or his teachers, young William Ireland would haunt the streets of London, hanging about the stage doors of theaters to observe the actors coming and going, and then going home and painstakingly building little theaters of cardboard in his bedroom.

Later he became fascinated by medieval heraldry. Old helmets and breastplates, dinged and rusty and useless in an era of gunpowder, collected dust in odd corner stalls around London, and so William happily poked around looking for odd bits from broken-up suits of armor. Once home with his newfound treasures, William scrubbed the rust off and polished them, and then sat in his bedroom trying to assemble his jumbled collection of odd pieces into a suit of armor.

For the missing pieces, he cut and pasted in more bits of ornamented cardboard. Soon his bedroom became a regiment of armor pastiches, and at night he would sit up in his bed and stare at them in the moonlight, dreamily imagining himself clad in.shining armor and riding up to a dark and forbidding castle.

In the meantime, William ricocheted from school to school, until finally his ill health forced his father to choose the time-honored last resort for parents of the sickly and unpromising: boarding school on the Continent. William spent four idyllic years in France, and upon his return at the age of seventeen was not only as useless as before but had also developed the impenetrable affectation of a French accent. Despairing of his son's ever making a mark, Samuel Ireland finally prevailed upon a lawyer friend in London to hire the teenager as a lowly clerk.

BY THIS TIME Samuel had built a middling reputation as an engraver and author of illustrated travelogues of the British countryside. In 1793, when William was eighteen years old, father and son journeyed up the River Avon in pursuit of material for

Samuel's planned volume Picturesque Views on the Warwickshire Avon. The pair gravitated to Stratford-on-Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare. Young William knew Shakespeare by heart, since every night his father would gather his family after dinner and read them excerpts from the Immortal Bard.

To merchants in Stratford, Samuel must have looked like a moneybag endowed with limbs and a head. For while the Catholic Church invented the first tourist traps—pilgrimage stopovers that sold innumerable slivers of the True Cross and "saint's bones" butchered from unfortunate pigs—Stratford was the first secular tourist trap. No one in town had paid much attention to Shakespeare after his death, but the steady stream of devotees spurred actor David Garrick in 1769 to establish the town's first Shakespeare Festival. Local shops began offering Shakespeare relics carved from the inexhaustible supply of wood offered by the old mulberry tree that once sat in his backyard; enough Shakespeare personal effects were sold each year to furnish an entire neighborhood.

It was into this gruesome chamber of tchotchkes that Samuel and his son wandered. Samuel enthusiastically snapped up the stool upon which the Bard had once courted Anne Hathaway, as well as a goblet carved from the Great Bard's Most Wonderfully Proliferating Mulberry Tree. Sensing a fine pair of rubes, a local "historian" directed the two to a country estate outside Stratford where—so it was said—old papers of Shakespeare's might still be found. The antiquarian book collector and his son excitedly rushed out to the country estate of a Mr. Williams, where they were led into a small and gloomy parlor. Samuel could barely contain himself before he blurted out a question to Williams: had he seen any Shakespeare papers lying about the mansion?

Oh dear, said the expression on the landlord's face.

"By God!" he cried. "I wish you had arrived a little sooner! Why, it isn't a fortnight since I destroyed several baskets-full of letters and papers, in order to clear a small chamber for some young partridges which I wish to bring up alive: and as to Shakespeare, why, there were many bundles with his name wrote upon them."

Williams may have paused here, just to watch the blood drain from his guests' faces. He then pointed out the room's fireplace.

"Why, it was in this very fireplace I made a roaring bonfire of them. My dear," he called to his wife, "don't you remember bringing me down those baskets of paper from the partridge room? And that I told you there were some about Shakespeare the poet?"

—I told you, his wife replied, not to burn those papers.

Samuel rose from his chair in unutterable anguish, gasping My God! He demanded to

be taken to the partridge pens, where he and his son spent the rest of their Stratford stay poking around the rafters and floorboards, all while Mr. Williams relaxed by the fire downstairs and, one suspects, enjoyed a snifter of brandy and a good laugh.

After they returned to London, the truth dawned on the younger Ireland: they had been had. Samuel Ireland, though, clung tenaciously to his delusions. He put Shakespeare's courting stool in a place of honor in his sitting room, and often invited visitors to rest their backsides upon that very same seat where the Immortal Derriere had once sat. Watching this, William now saw his father was gullible. Realizing the full extent of parental fallibility is a jarring moment in young adulthood, all the more so when that parent is widely thought to be smarter than you. William did not gloat in this, but it did present a way by which he might gain that which his father had always withheld: recognition of his son's intelligence and talents as a writer.

THE OFFICE OF Bingley, Esq., was not a busy one, and his employer's many trips out left William Henry plenty of opportunities to haunt old bookstalls, as well as to shut himself into the office to work uninterrupted on poetry; with a vast store of office supplies on hand, in a time when pen and ink were still rather dear for most citizens, Ireland was free to chase whatever literary whim might seize him during his supposed working hours. William Henry set about the fanciful task of writing out some of Shakespeare's plays in longhand— in Shakespeare's hand, to be precise. He did not get very far in this project, but it did give him an idea.

One afternoon in late 1794, while poking through old obscure tracts in a street stall, he came across a small volume of prayers beautifully bound in vellum and stamped in gold with Queen Elizabeth's arms—probably a presentation copy from the author to the Queen. But without any documentation to prove this, it was worth little. Ireland bought it cheaply from the bookseller and took it back to the office. The law records there dated back hundreds of years, giving William Henry a fair notion of what Elizabethan documents looked like. He pilfered a blank sheet of old paper from a file and settled down at his desk to titrate some water into a pot of ink; the weakened solution, applied to the old paper, produced appropriately faded writing. William dipped his pen and proceeded to write a dedicatory epistle from the author to the Queen—all the proof one needed for the book to become collectible. Once the ink had dried, he tucked the epistle into the front cover and left the office.

His first stop was at Mr. Laurie's, a bookbinder down the street in New Inn Passage. Ireland was well-known to Laurie and his two journeymen, for he had often stopped by with books of his own and his father's in need of repair. William showed off his epistle and asked them what they thought.

—It certainly looks old, Laurie replied.

But one of the journeymen, examining it more closely, said: I can make a better old ink

than that for you. William watched as the journeyman mixed three liquids together in a vial, compounds normally used for marbling the front and end papers of books. The concoction frothed and bubbled for a moment, and settled back into a brownish ink. The journeyman wrote out a few words with it.

—It's very faint, Ireland observed.

The journeyman held the document over an open fire. As the paper warmed and rustled in the updraft, the ink darkened into legibility—and into an oxidized brown tint that perfectly captured the appearance of two-hundred-year old ink.

— One shilling, the journeyman said.

Ireland paid it.

WILLIAM RETURNED TO Bingley's office and, quill in hand, scratched out a new letter to Queen Elizabeth. This forgery he tucked into the little prayer book and took it home with him that evening, where he basked in paternal admiration. His father, delighted by the find, encouraged his son to keep looking in the bookstalls. Perhaps he could succeed in the one pursuit where Samuel had been frustrated—the autograph of William Shakespeare. "I would gladly give half my library for such an autograph," Samuel mused.

William ransacked his absent employer's old files in the hope that a land deed might have Shakespeare's name on it, but it was no use. A search of stalls selling old papers and parchments turned nothing up. There was, however, a plentiful supply of the mysterious brown ink. One sleepy December morning in Bingley's office, Ireland cut the end off an ancient rent roll and used it to write up a lease agreement between Shakespeare and John Heminge. Unlike any attempt to mimic Shakespeare's own play manuscripts, a forged legal document was so mundane as to be utterly believable. At the bottom of the lease William traced out Shakespeare's signature from a published copy.

As a legal document, it needed a wax seal. William pulled a pile of neglected seventeenth-century deeds from the office files, sat down at a desk, and clicked open his penknife. Pressing the flat of the blade against the paper, he slid it across the back of the seal, paring away the wax in one whole piece from the parchment. Soon he had a small

pile of authentic old wax seals ready to apply-to documents, save for one problem: they had all dried out about two hundred years ago. He grabbed an ash shovel from the office fireplace, laid a few seals in it, and held it over the flaming hearth, hoping that the heat would melt the back of the seals enough to make them adhere again. But the desiccated beeswax crumbled, so he tried heating new wax and applying it to the back

of the old seals like glue. To hide the difference in color between old and new wax, he darkened and dirtied the entire seal with some ash from the hearth.

By December 16, after two weeks of work, William was ready to unveil his newest discovery.

"I have a great curiosity to show you," he said as he entered his father's study.

—Yes? his father replied.

William drew out the lease from the breast pocket of his overcoat and handed it to Samuel.

"There, sir! What do you think of that?"

Samuel opened the parchment and read over it carefully. Then he examined the seal. William watched with mounting anxiety as his father carefully folded the document back up and handed it back to him.

"I certainly believe it to be a genuine deed of the time."

William pressed it back into his father's hand.

"If you think so, I beg your acceptance of it."

This document—the signature of Shakespeare—was what his father had so long wanted that he would have given half his library for it. Clearly moved, Samuel took a set of keys from his pocket and passed them to his son.

"These are the keys of my bookcase. Go and take from it whatsoever you please; I shall refuse you nothing."

William handed back the keys.

"I thank you, sir; but I shall accept of nothing."

His father rose from his chair, unlocked the case, and drew out a slim volume published by Will Stokes in 1652, The Vaulting-Master, or, The Art of Vaulting. Almost half of the book consisted of engraved

plates, which William recognized as a sign of the book's rarity and value. His father knew this, too.

—Take it, he said. Please.

William had pleased his father at last.

BEING A DUTIFUL son, the junior Ireland continued forging documents for his father over the next few days. When asked how he had found them, he had a tale prepared. An older gentleman, informed of young William's interest in old books and papers, had invited him to a mansion where he had a large store of them at hand. Visible among these were a few—and perhaps, hinted William, many—bearing Shakespeare's signature. The gentleman, not wishing to attract attention to himself, was only to be known as Mr. H. The good nobleman proved to be a very generous friend indeed. On December 18, William returned home with an IOU from Shakespeare to John Heminge, of the Globe Theatre. On the 20th he unveiled Shakespeare's draft letter to his patron Lord Southampton; both documents were received with incredulous joy by his father.

William even added another authentic element to his ruse. One day, probably when he should have been at work, he sauntered over to the Parliament building to watch the proceedings from the visitors' gallery at the House of Lords. While bewigged lords droned on below, William noticed an ancient and ragged tapestry hanging on the back wall. Moving himself next to it, he stealthily tore off a swatch of fabric, which he pocketed while innocently continuing to watch the debate below. Now he had genuine old thread for tying up his rolled-up documents.

William pondered what his next discovery might be. He knew that readers were vexed by the possibility that their Bard might have been Catholic. There is, after all, that suspicious reference to Purgatory by the ghost of Hamlet's father. In an era when anti-Catholic legislation was favorably viewed by many, such papist skullduggery was improper in a national literary hero. And so, on Christmas Day of 1794, William presented his nation with a fine gift—Shakespeare's Profession of Faith, in which he disowns any Catholic sympathies.

His father was awed by the import of this, so -much so that he could no longer keep the discoveries secret. All holiday frivolity was to be set aside now.

—I must bring in reputable men to examine these papers, he said.

Young William went pale at this. To fool his father was one thing, but scholars? The waters were rising, and any minute he would be in over his head.

When Drs. Parr and Wharton arrived at the Ireland household, Samuel was waiting in the study for them. Young William stayed away from the room; he had no desire to witness what was about to happen. But finally the call came, and William entered his father's study almost paralyzed with terror. After a few formal questions about the origins of the manuscripts, the doctors warmly praised the young man for his discovery, at which William bowed his head—as much from fright as from modesty.

Samuel then commenced the reading of the Profession of Faith:

I beynge nowe ofe sounde Mynde doe hope thatte thys mye wyshe wille atte mye deathe bee acceeded toe as I nowe lyve in Londonne ande as mye soule maye perchance soone quitte thys poore Bodye it is mye desire thatte inne such case I maye bee carryed toe mye native place ande thatte mye Bodye bee there quietlye interred wythe as little pompe as canne bee, ande I doe nowe inne these mye seyriouse moments make thys mye profes-sione of fayth. . . .

William agonized through each syllable. At the end of the reading, Dr. Parr spoke first.

"Sir, we have very fine passages in our church service, and our litany abounds with beauties; but here, sir, here is a man who has distanced us all!"

Dazed, William excused himself from the room and walked blindly into the dining room. The teenager leaned heavily against the window and pressed his face against the cold glass, his mind a mass of chaos.

He had become the country's Greatest Writer.

WILLIAM NOW POSSESSED something that no one suspected in him: literary genius. Over the following weeks he wrote at a desperate white heat. Legal documents, theater receipts, letters between Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare; and finally a love letter from Shakespeare to Anne Hathaway, complete with a lock of hair and a sonnet attached:

Is there inne heavenne aught more rare Thanne thou sweete Nymphe of Avon fayre Is there onne Earthe a marine more trewe Thanne Willy Shakspeare is toe you. . . .

The precious lock was quickly split up and set into rings for fashionable Londoners. Words of the discoveries spread quickly, and so many visitors descended upon Norfolk Street that Samuel had to print up admission tickets. But he basked in the attention; once a mediocre engraver and antiquarian book collector, he was now the possessor of the greatest literary discovery of the century. The rich and the powerful knocked on his door: the Prince of Wales came to visit, as did Prime Minister William Pitt and Poet Laureate Henry Pye. When James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson, stopped in, he was so overcome with emotion at the sight of the papers that he could only recover with the aid of a tumbler of warm brandy and water—which, in truth, he might have asked for even were he not overcome with emotion. Finishing off his brandy, he pulled himself from his chair and declared, "Well, I shall now die contented, since I have lived to witness the present day." A few months later he most obligingly made good on this promise.

The praise of Britain's elite fired William's imagination; even as Samuel shone in the

reflected glory of the Shakespeare papers, William watched from outside his father's study and alone knew who the real literary genius was. Soon his promises to his father became more and more ambitious, even rash.

—I've found a handwritten manuscript of King Lear, he said one day.

He had been hard at work on this for some time. But it was not a mere transcription of King Lear from the published editions. William decided he was going to improve on the original. It was a typical impulse for his time; eighteenth-century theaters were infamous for removing unseemly humor in Shakespeare tragedies, or excising tragic moments from comedies. And since Georgians dearly wished their Bard could be more refined in his tastes, William replaced Shakespeare's lines with improved versions that removed any earthy humor.

Samuel and a throng of experts were delighted, and William topped it off by discovering books from Shakespeare's library—volumes which, had anyone noticed, looked suspiciously similar to ones for sale the previous week on Charing Cross, but which now bore the great poet's comments in the margins.

In churning out a blizzard of false documents, William developed a steady forged handwriting in which he could write as assuredly as in his natural hand. But as he set about writing his next discovery, a manuscript of Hamlet —or "Hamblette," as he had renamed it in a bizarre attempt at archaic spelling—he was getting restless. He no longer wanted to merely invent legal documents and improve on famous plays. He wanted something more.

ONE DAY, BETWEEN visits from the famous and the merely curious, William sat alone in his father's study on Norfolk Street. In a display case he could see the rapidly growing pile of Shakespeare papers; none, though, had given him a chance to exercise his own literary talents. As he brooded and looked about the room, his eye fell upon a picture hanging over the fireplace: a painting of King Vortigern, an infamously ruthless king of fifth-century Britain. Now here, William reflected, was a subject worthy of a Shakespeare play. He pulled down his father's old copy of Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles (1577)—the same account Shakespeare relied on when writing his history plays.

Holinshed portrayed King Vortigern as a rather nasty piece of

work. He had no claim on the throne, but served as the scheming adviser to a simple-minded heir:

Ye have heard how Constantius was made a moonke in his fathers life time, bicause he thought to be too soft and childish in wit, to have anie publike rule committed to his hands: but for that cause speciallie did Vortigerne seeke t'advance him, to the end that

the king being not able to governe of himselfe, he might have the chiefest swaie, and so rule all things as it were under him.

Hidden behind this legitimate heir, Vortigern sowed discord amongst his enemies and rivals, and sent innocent men to the gallows. When Constantius was no longer of any use to him, Vortigern simply had him murdered and seized the throne. Still married, he announced his intention of taking a second wife, who promptly attempted to poison him; he was then overthrown by Constantius's legitmate heirs and by citizens disgusted with the usurper's murderous debauchery.

After reading Holinshed, William proudly announced to his father the discovery of an entire original play by Shakespeare: Vortigern. His father was so delighted that he badgered William about it every day. William, writing as fast as he could in the unsafe sanctuary of his workplace—one morning the cleaning lady burst in on him in mid-forgery—had to keep stalling Samuel. Mr. H, he explained, was transcribing his own copy before allowing it to leave the mansion.

It took William two months to finish the play. When he presented it to Samuel in late March 1795, his father did something unusual— he wouldn't let anyone else see it. This play, Samuel knew, was pure gold. He quietly began inquiring at some of London's biggest theaters: might they be interested in staging Shakespeare's lost play?

Producers offered Samuel contracts for Vortigeim sight unseen. But the most prestigious to rise to the bait was Robert Brinsley Sheridan of the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane—the most prominent producer and playwright in London, and a member of Parliament to boot. But after reading the first few pages, with Samuel looking on, Sheridan's ardor cooled a bit: "There are certainly some bold ideas here, but they are crude and undigested. It is very odd: one would be led to think that Shakespeare must have been very -young when he wrote the play." Lest Samuel become alarmed, Sheridan then added, "As to the doubting whether it is his or not, who can possibly look at the papers and not believe them ancient?"

Samuel wanted £500. Sheridan, knowing that he could not back out of the deal now, sensibly haggled him down to £250. He felt it was simply a mediocre Shakespeare play; few people questioned the authenticity of the papers. Why would they? The paper was real enough, as were the seals. And everyone knew that William Ireland wasn't clever enough to write well in his own modern tongue, never mind forge a document in Elizabethan English. They would have been right on the last count, if only they could see it. William couldn h forge a document in Elizabethan English, as his love letter to Anne Hathaway demonstrates:

O Anna doe I love doe I cheryshe thee inne mye hearte forre thou arte as a talle Cedarre stretchynge forthe its branches ande suc-courynge smaller Plants fromme

nyppynge Winneterre orr the boysterouse Wyndes Farewelle toe Morrowe bye tymes I wille see thee tille thenne Adewe sweete Love

This was the work of an ambitious but inexperienced youth who mimicked old writing by arbitrary additions of double consonants, replacing i with y, and tacking e at the end of words. It wasn't Elizabethan dialect.

It wasn't any dialect.

THERE IS A truism among museum curators that the best forgeries are the ones still hanging on the walls. Any example of forgery is necessarily an example of a flawed forgery, because it is known to be a forgery. The best forgeries are beyond reproach in their authenticity: they have so successfully insinuated themselves into a body of work that they are eternally part of its history. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, if you love a forgery enough it becomes real. But most forgers are not this successful. Forgeries generally succeed for no more than a generation or so, if that, because rather than looking like the works they purport to be, they look like what we want these works to be. They caricature the aesthetic prejudices of an age, and when that age has passed the ruse becomes embarrassingly obvious.

But discovery loomed closer for William with each passing day. After running out of ink, he went back to Mr. Laurie's for more; surely the journeymen had their suspicions. William had picked his employer's law office clean of old paper and had to bribe a bookseller on St. Martin's Lane with five shillings so that he could to slice the blank front and back pages out of old books. Then a friend named Talbot, suspicious all along of William, crept into the law offices one day and caught him red-handed. So far, though, these potential informants kept his secret.

Even so, Samuel's incessant demands for more papers were exhausting William, as were the constant pleas to meet with Mr. H. Since Mr. H. had such sway over his father, William began to address letters from him to his father. They were replete with praise for his brilliant son's poetic gifts and deeply ironic comparisons to Shakespeare:

... I would not scruple giving £2000 a year to have a son with such extraordinary facilities. If at twenty he can write so what will he do hereafter. The more I see of him the more I am amazed. If your son is not a second Shakespeare I am not a man . . . Your son is brother in genius to Shakespeare. He is the only man that ever walked with him hand in hand.

William would watch his father's face for any sign of agreement. But Samuel didn't want to hear about paying William more attention and a greater allowance; he wanted Shakespeare papers. Exasperated, William made another bid for attention: he discovered a second trunk full of documents at the house of Mr. H. He rashly produced a list of the contents of this second trunk: complete manuscripts of Richard II and

Henry V, partial manuscripts for six other plays, a new play titled Henry the Second, and—most incredibly—Shakespeare's autobiography.

William hatched schemes to ensure that the document windfall would continue far into the future. Hearing that the butcher living in Shakespeare's house in Stratford-on-Avon was selling it, William attempted to buy it. Had he succeeded, it would have presented infinite opportunity for new discoveries: under every floorboard, behind every fireplace brick, and over every rafter could be found a new sonnet, a secret love letter, an undiscovered play!

Unable to secure the house, William handily produced a Letter of Deed from Shakespeare recounting the heroic deeds of one . . . William Henry Ireland. There had indeed been a William Ireland in London in Shakespeare's day; only now, this Ireland became the young man who rescued Willy from drowning by diving into the Thames after him. In gratitude, Shakespeare had written a rider to his will bequeathing William Ireland the rights to eight plays—including Vortigern and Henry the Second.

Perhaps, William hinted to anyone who would listen, this other Ireland was a direct ancestor of his, and this was why Mr. H had chosen him as the recipient of the Shakespeare papers. An ancient will was now being honored, and William Henry Ireland—the dullard boy who never knew for sure who his mother was—was now the fabulously lucky descendant of a friend of William Shakespeare's.

SAMUEL IRELAND WAS ready in December 1795 to present his lavish volume of transcriptions and facsimile plates, Miscellaneous Papers Under the Hand and Seal of William Shakespeare. William begged him not to publish it, but Samuel was not to be deterred—why, these were the papers of Shakespeare! How could he not publish them? And so William waited with growing dread, knowing that the flimsiness of his inventions would now be exposed for every scholar in Britain to pick apart, and not to simply glance at in the display case in his father's study.

He would be tested sooner than he thought. One day William strolled from Bingley's offices and back to his father's house for his midafternoon break. When he arrived, he found the house in tumult.

—What's wrong? he asked.

Albany Wallis had just visited. Though he was Samuel's friend and lawyer and a neighbor on Norfolk Street, he had long been skeptical of the papers. Wallis informed Samuel that he had discovered a genuine old deed signed by John Heminge. Wallis presented Samuel with his document, and Samuel pulled the other out from the display case—the very one that William had affixed Heminge's name and signature to for his very first Shakespeare forgery. The two signatures looked nothing alike. William was horror-struck: he'd picked Heminge because he thought there were no

extant signatures, and now his bluff was called.

—Let us go see it, he told his father.

At Wallis's office, the lawyer once again produced the deed. William stared it, memorizing its every curve and letter. Excusing himself from the chambers, and promising an explanation from Mr. H very shortly, he calmly left Wallis's building—and then ran back to Bingley's offices. He dashed out a receipt bearing the signature of Heminge, executed as best as he could remember it from Wallis's document, and then warmed it over the fire to age the special ink. He dashed back to Wallis's office with the new receipt in hand.

It was all a silly misunderstanding, William told him. Mr. H had explained everything: there were two John Heminges, one that worked with the Globe Theatre, and one that worked over at the Curtain Theatre. Shakespeare had done business with them both, and so had signatures from both in the papers. See?—He handed him the receipt—I also have a signature from your Heminge!

Wallis examined the document and admitted that the proof was clear enough. He was sorry now that he had ever doubted the papers. William returned to Bingley's office, cranked out an improved copy of the first, and then returned to Wallis to let him look at the receipt more closely. The illusion was so perfect that Wallis didn't realize that he was looking at a different piece of paper from the one he'd stared at just minutes before.

William accomplished these forgeries in just over an hour—and that included walking back and forth between the offices. By four-thirty, the crisis was over and Wallis placated. This feat weighed much in William's favor. The papers had to be real if they could be produced on such short notice: it was inconceivable that anyone could forge that quickly and effortlessly.

SHERIDAN KEPT PUSHING the Vortigern premiere back, as if he was hoping to make the whole thing go away. By the time it would get staged, it would be after the publication of the Shakespeare papers, and after the inevitable attacks to follow. Samuel pleaded with Sheridan to speed up the premiere, but to no avail.

On Christmas Eve 1795, the London Times ran a notice that Miscellaneous Papers Under the Hand and Seal of William Shakespeare was now ready to be picked up at Samuel's house. London's literati stopped by Norfolk Street that day for their copy, delighted to have the Bard's personal letters to read by the Yule log. Other buyers were delighted for different reasons: they were sharpening their knives.

The first attack appeared days later in The Tomahawk:

Ireland, Ireland, tell to me,

"Who wrote Shakespeare J s writings?" — THEE!

The following weeks did not bring much relief. The obvious target for ridicule was Ireland's bizarre spelling, and on January 14 a journalist at The Telegraph happily "discovered" another letter of Shakespeare's:

TOOO MlSSTEERREE BEENJAAMMIINNEE JOOHNNSSONN Deeree Sirree,

Wille youe doee meee theee fawourree too dinnee wythee meee onnn Friddaye nextte attt twoo off theee clockee too eatee sommee muttonne choppes andd somme poottaattooeesse

I amm deerree sirree

Yourre goodde friendde

WlLLIAME SHAEKSPARE

Other newspapers followed with parodies of Shakespeare's letters, and the January issue of the Monthly Mirror screamed, "THE WHOLE IS A GROSS AND IMPUDENT IMPOSITION, AN INSULT TO THE CHARACTER OF OUR IMMORTAL BARD, AND A LIBEL ON THE TASTE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATION!!" Editor James Boaden flayed the papers alive, amply demonstrating to readers the "vicious and fantastic orthography" of William's mock-Tudor spelling. And there was more: by January 20, it was whispered that the pugnacious lawyer and Shakespeare scholar Edward Malone had prepared a skewering of the papers. Malone was known as a devastating cross-examiner in the courtroom, and Samuel and William waited miserably the entire winter for his onslaught.

Rumblings came back to Samuel from Drury Lane that Sheridan was not exactly doing his utmost on behalf of the play. He was recycling as many old props and costumes as he could, while lead actor John Kemble ridiculed the dialogue during rehearsals, encouraging the cast to join in with him. Many did. Then, to top it off, Sheridan wickedly chose a premiere date of April 1, 1796—April Fool's Day. Samuel protested, and Sheridan barely relented. The premiere was set for the following evening, Saturday, April 2.

VORTIGERN IS NOT a bad play. William held his inept Ye Olde Sppellingge in check enough that the play script looks convincingly Shakespearean, and it has all the grand sweep of battle and gore that one could desire from an early Shakespeare tragedy. But there are no subplots, no false leads, no irony, and not the faintest leavening of humor. Despite the Fool in the cast, Vortigern is humorless, whereas even in his darkest plays,

Shakespeare managed to nudge the audience with a bit of bitter laughter. Still, in an aching soliloquy by Aurelius, newly arrived in Britain to reclaim the throne from Vortigern, young William's gifts were obvious:

O God! why shou y d I, a mere speck on earth,

Tear thousands from their wives, children, and homes!

O! wherefore from this transitory sleep,

That now doth steal from them their inward cares,

Should I send thousands to cold dreary death?

'Tis true, I am a King, and what of that?

Is not life dear to them, as 'tis to me?

0! peasant, envy not the prince's lot;

Thy page in lifers great book is not foul charged,'

And like to ours besmeare'd with dying breaths.

Of had I lives myself enough to answer

The ravenous and greedy jaws of death,

That will on these my friends, my soldiers,

Such havoc make, and wanton gluttony!

Father of mercy, great God, spare this blood!

And if I must alone receive the crown,

Bedecked with purple gore, I here resign it.

Fine words—but William's most brilliant lines could not save him now.

ON MARCH 31 the sword fell. Edward Malone had not been idle in the intervening three months— An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments had snowballed from a short pamphlet into a 424-page avalanche of utterly damning evidence against the papers. Malone presents his Inquiry as a

courtroom drama, in which Malone is presenting exhibit after exhibit of evidence to the judging reader, more than backed up by two hundred voluminous footnotes. He attacks the papers for their spelling, for the use of words and phrases that didn't exist in Shakespeare's time, and for the disparity between known signatures and the ones Ireland had forged. Malone spared no cost to take each Ireland document, one by one, and tear it to pieces: he filled his book with expensive foldout plates and illustrations to compare true and false signatures side by side. He could hardly hide his scorn; when quoting from Shakespeare's love poem to Anne Hathaway, Malone interrupts himself to spit, "I shall not therefore sicken your Lordship with any more of this namby-pamby stuff."

Actually, much of Malone's evidence was wrong. Many claims that certain words were not in use during Shakespeare's time were later disproved. And yet it hardly mattered. Even if all of Malone's criticisms were wrong—and they were not—he had disillusioned London from its infatuation with the papers. With this book, Malone was also crushing the career of the most talented young writer in London. But Malone hardly knew this. Even now, nobody imagined William as the true source of the forgeries.

A CROWD GATHERED outside the Theatre Royal hours before curtain time. It was a Saturday afternoon in the springtime, and the theatergoers were well liquored and pressing so furiously to get in that the Royal's staff had to barricade the doors. Dozens of hired boys shouted their way through the mob, dispensing a printed handbill from Samuel decrying the "malevolent and impotent attack" by Malone, and requesting that " Vortigem may be heard with that candour that has ever distinguished a British Audience."

The admission gate opened, and the distinguished British Audience stampeded into the Theatre Royal, pitching patrons headlong into the seating and onto the floor. Doorkeepers were pushed aside, and gate crashers poured in, ready for a bit of free play-bashing. Amid the chaos, Samuel made his way inside and took a seat in the center box. Supporters cheered him from one side of the theater, and detractors jeered from another.

Young William, not keen on sitting among thousands of half-sober partisans, quietly slipped backstage and into the green room. Nobody took much notice of his departure. Curtain call came, and actors and actresses came and went. Only one, Fanny Jordan, bothered to speak to the lad. She had always been a favorite of William's; unbeknownst to her, "Shakespeare" had actually written some of the play's dialogue and songs specifically for her. But she did know that William was miserable and nervous, and did her best to soothe him during her breaks between scenes.

—It is going well, she told him during the third act.

William believed her. But he did not believe in Vortigem anymore.

"It will not be represented a second time," he predicted.

FANNY HAD BEEN telling the truth. Although the actor fumbling through the play's prologue had been ridiculed by the crowd to the point of nearly breaking apart in anguish—a standard hazing in Georgian theaters—the first two acts of Vortigem proceeded smoothly enough, with the curtain closing both times to applause from the audience. Not everyone in the audience believed it to be Shakespeare, but at least they all believed it to be a good play for their two shillings. Samuel could look about the theater from his box seat and see a motley cross-section of London, MPs and pickpockets alike, enjoying the play that he'd discovered.

And then Charles Dignum walked onstage. Dignum was not a distinguished actor. He had a high reedy voice utterly inapproriate to his role as a baron, and as he spoke the audience began to snigger, the giggling welling up and up until Dignum had to yell the line:

Let them bellow on!

in his flouncing tenor. The audience burst out in laughter, wiping their eyes and applauding the ludicrous acting for minutes on end, bringing the play to a complete halt. John Kemble came onstage and pleaded with them to let the play proceed, and an increasingly drunk supporter—Charles Sturt, member of Parliament—yelled at the audience to shut up. The laughter finally died down, but only just, and Act III staggered on.

Act IV has the play's climactic battle scenes between the Saxons and the Scots. Sheridan had maliciously cast a bulbous-nosed comic actor named Phillimore in the role of the Saxon general. After falling in battle, Phillimore sprawled his body across the stage, but not where he had been told to during rehearsal. As the heavily weighted curtain descended on the scene, it landed full on Phillimore's ample gut, leaving half his body in front of and half behind the curtain.

Ooooooooohhhhhh . . . , he groaned.

This was just too much. The audience hooted with laughter that increased with each groan and yodel from Phillimore and his twitching body. Sturt, MP, became so enraged that he leaped from his box onto the stage and drunkenly grabbed Phillimore by the costume to drag him away. Audience members doubled over in comic agony. As Act V proceeded and supporters in the box seats applauded it, others in the theatre drunkenly pelted them with oranges. Sturt, a supporter but now disgusted with the hash the actors were making of the play, picked up the oranges from around his seat, peeled them with his pocketknife, and then flicked orange peel at the actors as they spoke their lines.

It got worse.

In the midst of Act V, detractors waited for a prearranged signal— a line which would set off a riot. They got it in scene 2 with the line

And when this solemn mock'ry is ended . . .

Suddenly, William recalled, "the most discordant howl echoed from the pit that ever assaulted the organs of hearing." It roared on for ten minutes until Kemble, the lead in the play, started by redelivering the exact same line, bringing down the house all over again. Sturt, who though only an MP was now as drunk as a lord, stood up in his box and bent over to moon the baying mob, for which he was rewarded with another volley of oranges.

The play staggered to its end, whereupon an unfortunate actor reappeared onstage to announce that there would be another performance of Vortigern the following Monday. The crowd went berserk. It took fifteen minutes for the staff to restore order so that Kemble could announce that Sheridan's School for Scandal would also be playing next week.

He was pelted by fruit—apples, this time.

Despite the hopeful stage announcement, William had guessed right. Sheridan sent word after the play: Vortigern's first performance was its last.

THE NEXT DAY William and Samuel collected their share of the take— £102, which was very good for an opening night, but nothing like what they'd have made had the play not closed after one performance. Samuel gave William a £30 share; it was the last money William was to see for quite some time.

The Shakespeare papers still had believers, despite Malone's attacks and the fracas of Vortigern's opening night. Foremost among them was Samuel himself. But his name was being tarred around town as a forger, and he complained that "the public determination is to pursue me even to ruin." He begged William to reveal the identity of Mr. H—only then, he explained, could he show the public the true and reputable source of the papers. William refused, agonized, and then refused again. Finally, after a week of Samuel's pleas, he relented.

—I will give H's identity to our lawyer, Wallis, in a sworn affidavit, he said. Mr. H will be present at the swearing. But Wallis will have to keep his identity secret from you.

It seemed a fair compromise to William, for when the forgeries were fully uncovered, Albany Wallis could vouch that Samuel had been kept in the dark the whole time, thus

saving Samuel's reputation. A meeting was set for May 19 at a local inn; unknown to William, Samuel hid himself across the street so that he might see Mr. H entering the building. To his great disappointment, he saw nothing.

Wallis, though, heard everything—a complete confession.

One of the papers' believers, bursting with curiosity afterward, asked William to at least tell him this: would he recognize Mr. H if he saw him?

Oh yes, William said.

"You would recognize him at first sight."

CONFESSING TO WALLIS did little to ease William's mind. Pressed by demands for answers on all sides, he retreated into extravagant lies and make-believe about a dream life that he could scarcely distinguish any more from the real world. He talked grandly of Mr. H's generosity and distributed money and expensive gifts to friends and actors, all courtesy of Mr. H. The wealthy nobleman was to buy him a horse and a stable; soon William was seen trotting about town with his new horse and carriage. Construction on a carriage house began, too, courtesy of Mr. H, until Wallis—who knew that it was all coming out of William's rapidly shrinking pocket—stepped in and talked some sense into him.

No matter. Mr. H had promised William an estate of £300 a year! And the manager of Covent Garden, after seeing the script of Henry the Second, had promised a £700 advance! And—William proudly informed his delighted family—he had become engaged to a wealthy young Miss Shaw of Harley Street. Samuel began to make preparations for the wedding, calculating how many servants and linens and how much money the new couple would be needing.

But when Samuel visited Harley Street, there was no Shaw family. When he visited Covent Garden, the manager had never heard of Henry the Second.

And then William's thirty pounds ran out.

BY JUNE, SAMUEL was at the end of his tether. Traveling away from Norfolk Street, he wrote a wrenching letter to his son:

I have no rest either night or day, which might be much alleviated by a more open and candid Conduct on your side. Surely if there is a person for whom you can for a moment feel, it must be for a parent who has never ceased to render you every comfort and attention, from your earliest moment of existence to the present. I think you must sometimes reflect and place yourself in your imagination at a future period of life, having a son and being in such a predicament as I stand at the moment; and

then judging what must be your state of mind, and what must be mine at present.

But Samuel was too late, for William never received the letter. The day before, with his father away from home, William had quietly got married—not to a wealthy young Miss Shaw, but to an unknown "girl about town" named Alice Crudge. Two days later, while Samuel's letter was still in the mail, William left the house in the afternoon, telling the maid he'd be back in the evening to pick up his things. He never returned to Norfolk Street again.

The newlyweds had struck out on their own. Alice had a little bit of money to her name, while William had none at all. Quite to the contrary, he had left some debts for his father to be pestered by. But he did undertake one final act to relieve his father. He confessed his authorship of the papers. There was just one problem: Samuel refused to believe him. If the papers were a forgery, he snapped, then they were somebody else's forgery—William simply didn't have the capacity to produce such work.

A week after leaving home, William beseeched Samuel:

Can you think so meanly of me as to be the Tool of some person of Genius? . . . The Vortigern I wrote; if I copied anyone it was the Bard himself, in no one paper, or parchment was I furnished with language by anyone living—if there is Soul or Imagery it is my own.

Do not wish to meet me, my dear father, I cannot yet bear it. I will instantly retire into Wales and give myself up to that study I so ardently wish for.

If the writer of the Papers, I mean the mind that breathes through them, shows any spark of Genius and deserves Honour, I, Sir, your son, am that person.

It was to no avail. Samuel steadfastly refused to believe William, refused even to believe that the papers were forgeries at all. A few months later, when William published a confession titled An Authentic Account of the Shakesperian Manuscripts, the British public also refused to believe him. Not only did William's confession not lessen the infamy hanging over his father, it made it worse: what kind of scoundrel, newspapers cried, would put his young son up to confessing to a crime that the father had so clearly committed?

The papers still had some defenders. But most, like George Chalmers in his Supplemental Apology for the Believers, seemed less interested in defending the papers than in knocking the stuffing out of pompous windbags like Malone. At one point Chalmers promises to unleash the following against one doubter:

1. Proofs of your being the author of the Pursuit of Literature.

2. Proofs of your impertinence.

3. Proofs of your malignity.

4. Proofs of your jacobinism.

5. Proofs of your ignorance.

6. Proofs of your nonsense.

7. Proofs of your inability to write poetry.

8. Proofs that you cannot write at all.

The only true believer left, it seemed, was Samuel Ireland. Samuel died in misery a few years later in 1800, insisting on his innocence and on the papers' authenticity even on his deathbed. To his dying breath, he could not believe that his slow-witted boy had written them.

EVERYONE SEEMED TO forget something: William had written a great play. Not Vortigem. Ireland's great achievement, it turned out, was his sequel, Henry the Second. Seasoned by his experience at writing Vortigem, and not yet publicly unmasked, in late 1795 William had labored mightily over his second history play, pounding it out in just two months. He didn't even have time to divide it into acts and scenes. But Henry the Second had everything Vortigern lacked—snaking subplots, character development, suspense, dramatic reversals of fortune, and a hint of humor. He even created his first truly resonant character in Thomas Becket, the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury; in William's play, he becomes a tragic figure driven forward to death by the twin goads of loyalty to his church and gnawing ambition:

The child that hath enough, will mewl for more. We from the cradle then are still the same, Eager to climb ambition's golden tree, Looking but upward to the topmost branch; Nor thinking once, if back we wou'd return, That we the boughs have bent, and broken so, That there is but to go on and gain the point, Or headlong we must totter down again.

But it was too late for soliloquies now. Critics and audiences across Britain were furious at the impudent boy who had made fools of them; those not angry at William simply believed him incapable of writing the forgeries, and were still convinced that it had been Samuel's fraud all along. In either case, no one was interested in seeing the new play written by William Henry Ireland. And so it went un-produced; no stage was ever graced by its lines, not to this day.

WILLIAM WAS NOT to know this, of course, and the newlywed spent his days after leaving home happily planning his next literary masterpiece. At first he and Alice drifted to the city of Bristol, where William lolled about and didn't get much writing done. One family acquaintance came across a young man walking by the roadside one day in Gloucestershire; it was William. He no longer even had a horse to his name. Yet he happily talked of his writing and of his desire to buy old books again—and then asked to borrow a few guineas.

Alice and William were living on nothing but borrowed money at this point; he borrowed from family and friends alike, telling some that it was to help finance his father's new book of engravings—an utter lie. Creditors dunned him for payment; in one letter, William pleads with his father, "The principal purport of this letter is to inform you of my wish of getting into some Situation and way of life which may keep me from Starving."

But the only calling for William, in the end, was that of a writer. He published his Account in 1797, and his two plays in 1799; that same year he also published his first novel, The Abbess. He spent the next three decades, until his death in 1835, churning out hack novels and satires that paid the bills but scarcely lived up to the promise of his early work. Tiring of making an honest living, he "discovered" Napoleon's will in 1821, and during 1824 miraculously discovered memoirs and letters by Henry IV of France and Joan of Arc. But these fooled nobody—by now people were wise to William's tricks.

Or so they thought.

WILLIAM NEVER DID lose his skill at quickly jotting off notes in Shakespeare's hand. Long after the frauds had been exposed, Morning Post editor John Taylor fell into conversation with William one night at the theatre. He asked William whether he really had been the forger, whereupon William instantly jotted off two Shakespeare signatures. When Taylor got home, he pulled down a Shakespeare book and compared the two; the likeness was uncanny. But there was a good reason for Ireland's remarkable memory: he had never really stopped forging.

The public may have stopped believing in the papers, but a fascination with the whole affair remained. Copies of William's 1797 Account were quickly snapped up for a shilling apiece, and in later years sometimes cost one guinea at auction. Eventually William found that he no longer had his own copy of Account and had to go to a bookseller to buy a used copy. He was chagrined to discover the price of his own book: "The only copy now in my possession is deficient in one leaf; and for this very mutilated impression I was compelled to pay eighteen shillings; being given to understand . . . that I was favoured in its sale at that price, because I was the author of the production."

At the Christie's estate sale for Samuel Ireland's goods in 1801, Samuel's collection of old books and papers, both real and counterfeit, attracted much interest. Among those bidding on the late and ruined antiquarian's worldly effects was a fellow with a strangely familiar face . . . Edward Malone. The very man who had destroyed Samuel and his papers now wanted to buy them.

William tried in 1805 to sate the public's interest in the forgeries by publishing a much-expanded account, The Confession of William Henry Ireland. By now the public had accepted the notion that William had been behind the forgeries, and for some time William had been receiving inquiries from interested collectors: did he still have any of the old Shakespeare forgeries lying around? Perhaps he would like to sell them? The manuscript of Vortigern, say? Might he still have that in his possession?

Oh yes, William would reply. It just so happens that I do.

It just so happened that William always had one in his possession. For ever since the forgeries had been exposed, and become a subject of morbid literary interest, he had been quietly doing something almost dazzlingly postmodern in its sheer ingenuity and conception.

He was making forgeries of the forgeries.

No fewer than seven "original" copies of the manuscript of Vortigern surfaced after William's death, along with a whole array of other copies that he made of the Shakespeare papers. Each is utterly authentic in appearance; it is impossible to tell which is the original and which is the copy. After all, the collectors were getting them straight from the source, and besides, who'd ever heard of a forgery of a forgery?

Ireland couldn't resist leaving one little hint for his clients. Among Ireland's many books is a bit of satirical verse from 1807, Stultifera Navis: Qua omnium mortalium narratur Stultia; The Modern Ship of Fools. It is an allegorical collection of a ship of fools of every variety, illustrated with a color folding plate inside the front cover. Noticeable among the fools is the figure of one particularly unfortunate fellow.

It is a Book Collector.

IF YOU GO today to the recently built reincarnation of the Globe Theatre, you will find one of Ireland's forged copies of a forged letter on display. It is his Heminge deed, the one that once nearly blew William's cover as he stood sweating and nervous in the law office of Albany Wallis. It is not merely a display piece—it is for sale by Bernard Quaritch Ltd., an antiquarian bookseller that has been housed just off Piccadilly Circus for two centuries now; it went into business not long after Ireland's death, and throughout its history it has periodically received bundles of Ireland forgeries from estate sales and the like—the result, probably, of some familial ancestor who eagerly

laid out a few pounds to buy an entire batch of "original forgeries" directly from William.

The forged Heminge letter on display will now set you back £2,750.

According to Quaritch specialist Theodore Hoffman, it's getting harder and harder each year to find Ireland forgeries. The papers themselves are holding up fairly well—he probably used either weak tea or lemon solution over a flame to induce browning, and neither of those would weaken the paper fibers too greatly. But William Henry Ireland, who worked so hard to make his papers look old and rare, has been sentenced to poetic justice—now his papers really are old and rare.

Finding a whole new batch of Ireland meta-forgeries might be worth quite a bit of money to someone. And since Ireland was none too careful or sophisticated in his techniques, it wouldn't be too hard . . . wait. The inevitable question is asked of Theodore—might someone be out there now, making a forgery of a forgery of a forgery? "No, no," he says quickly. "I don't think so. . . ."