

Fakes, Forgeries, and More

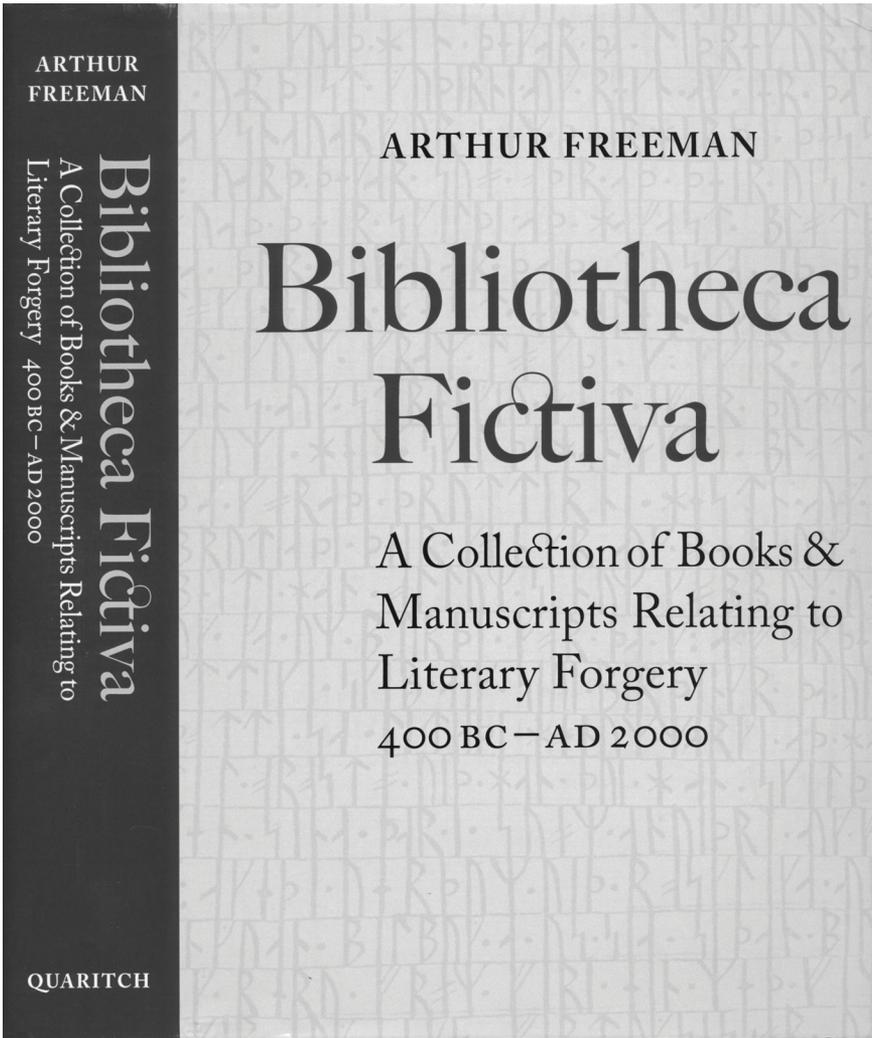
WILLIAM BUTTS

FREEMAN, Arthur. *Bibliotheca Fictiva: A Collection of Books & Manuscripts Relating to Literary Forgery, 400BC – AD 2000.* London: Bernard Quaritch Limited, 2014. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. xvi, 423pp. Illustrations. **\$95.00.**

HAVENS, Earle (editor). *Fakes, Lies, and Forgeries: Rare Books and Manuscripts from the Arthur and Janet Freeman Bibliotheca Fictive Collection.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries, 2014. 4to. Softbound. vii, 124pp. Illustrations. **\$35.00.**

Unless you're a student of the history of forgery, the most surprising discovery many will take away from Arthur Freeman's *Bibliotheca Fictiva: A Collection of Books & Manuscripts Relating to Literary Forgery, 400BC – AD 2000* is this: Historically, monetary gain is not the sole motivation of forgers. When people think of forgers at work today, most rightly think of miscreants creating phony signed photographs and autograph items of other relatively contemporary names to be unloaded on that forger's paradise, eBay, and other similar venues. Most would be hard pressed to come up with any motive other than filthy lucre to produce forgeries.

There's also a widely-held misconception that literary forgery is a modern (that is, twentieth century) phenomenon. They're actually correct here, but only if you're thinking of forgers producing low-skill, high-value items such as a baseball signed by Babe Ruth or photograph signed by Marilyn Monroe. Autograph collecting as a hobby first had to be established in order for there to be marketplace for buying and selling



such wares, and that's only developed over the past 150 or so years.

Is it just me, or is the past further away than it used to be? Call it the effect of our Internet age's preoccupation with immediacy, our collective obsession with the latest, the most current and up-to-date reported live as it happens, but the past has never seemed more dusty

and distant than it does now. It never ceases to stun this reviewer that the more high-tech we become, the more short-sighted we end up – that the less people take time to study the past, the more they fail to understand that human nature remains constant. Those who don't study the past tend to pour a thick molasses of nostalgia over it, to idealize and glorify the golden days of yore, when men were men and by gum your word and a spit shake sealed all deals.

Well, *Bibliotheca Fictiva* brings home that old epigram that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The same fast-buck criminals, twisted hoaxsters, disgruntled academics, deviant malcontents and other forgery perpetrators at work today were even harder at work in ancient times, the medieval era, the reformation, the renaissance, the age of enlightenment, the industrial era and of course into modern times. Only the motivation for forgery seems to have altered.

Arthur Freeman, an English bookseller, collected this material for more than four decades with his wife Janet Ing before finding a permanent home for it at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Explaining the evolution of their collection in his preface, he concludes, “there is no satisfactory general history of the genre, nor any truly dependable series of interlocking studies to define, among them, the scope and chronology of the field, upon which a collector might base a canon.” He also admits that inevitably their collection has its idiosyncracies and is far from definitive – this despite the fact that Johns Hopkins University now houses this premiere collection on the history of literary and historical forgery, a collection they continue to enlarge.

Freeman also provides a dense, fact-filled, *Cliff's Notes*-type 75-page “Overview” that precedes the actual bibliography and is itself worth the cost of admission. This fine scholarly tour-de-force takes the reader on a fact-filled romp through two millennia of trickery and shenanigans. Obviously it was not possible to collect primary texts from the earliest periods (Greek, Roman, early Christian), but for post-fourth-century texts he sought out “*editiones principes*, and often the first English editions, as well as the standard questionings or exposures.”

Most of *Bibliotheca Fictiva* concerns books relating to literary forgery, far more so than manuscripts. There's enough with autograph interest to pull along those interested exclusively in manuscript material,

to be sure. As cautionary tales autograph folks can learn much about the extraordinary lengths forgers will go to in order to achieve the perfect deception from the bookish forgeries that dominate. (About one-fourth of *Bibliotheca Fictiva*'s 36 illustrations depict manuscript forgeries, including the color frontispiece.)

Today's readers will be almost entirely unfamiliar with the vast majority of forgeries described in Freeman's "Overview" unless they happen to be classicists, Latin or church historians or knowledgeable in other arcane fields. No matter. Soldier on, for these pages run over with a lively mix of forgeries intended to surprise and entertain, to "fool the experts," to alter the historical record for some gain, to rewrite church doctrine, to sway opinion by distorting facts, to confound and confuse, to establish or destroy reputations or further careers... the motivations for forgery are plentiful compared to today's largely dollar-centered motivation. Expect a high learning curve in the earlier material (beginning with "Classical and Judeo-Christian Forgery to the Fall of Rome"), lessening somewhat as you get into the more familiar turf of more recent centuries.

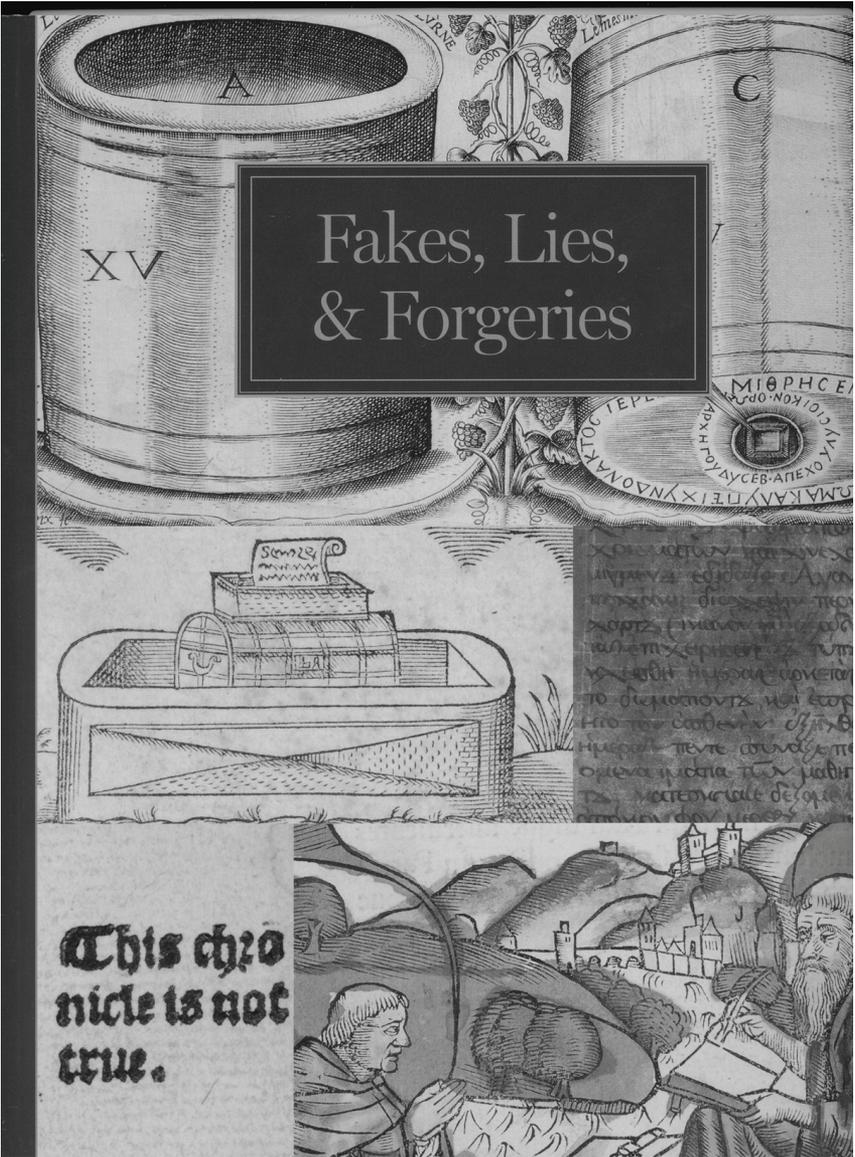
When you get to the eighteenth century, legendary forgery figures begin to emerge: The Scot James Macpherson, who built a career out of "discovering" and publishing translations of his fictional Gaelic poet Ossian. Comments Freeman, "The Ossianic phenomenon, however, far transcended any financial or place-seeking incentive that may have originally inspired Macpherson – an unshakeable pillar of the House of Forgery, whose dour industry was rewarded by literary celebrity, political advancement, and material fortune." Then there's Thomas Chatterton, who "began generating his mock-antiquarian compositions as a means of gaining local attention, and some profit..." The verse of poet and priest Thomas Rowley and others "discovered" by Chatterton enthralled many, including the literati of the day. And what's eighteenth-century forgery without the prolific and audacious William Henry Ireland, who near the end of the century enlarged the Shakespeare canon with his many creations that "took in a shocking number of learned and half-learned witnesses – he went on to generate quasi-fakes and voluminous 'miscellaneous literature' for nearly forty more years." *Bibliotheca Fictiva* features an impressive array of primary and secondary works by and about all three of these infamous figures.

Nary a historical book or autograph forgery can be named that's not contained in this "Overview" and then represented in some form in the bibliography that follows. The nineteenth century finds of course the most prolific and daring autograph forger of all time, Vrain-Denis Lucas, "who in a sixteen-year spree created some 27,000 forged letters and documents by writers ranging from Aristotle and Alexander the Great, Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, and Judas Iscariot... to Cicero, Dante, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Galileo, Pascal, and Newton." The entire Lucas output is holed up in the Bibliotheque Nationale, "hence... specimens of Lucas' faked letters are virtually unobtainable in commerce."

All this fails to scratch the surface of *Bibliotheca Fictiva*, whose contents span many countries, many languages, many centuries. The 300-plus page bibliography that backs up the virtuoso "Overview" summary delights this reviewer, for it is *annotated*. The physical descriptions of each of these 1,676 items are naturally of critical importance to any collector, scholar or research her, but Freeman's brief sentence (or two or three) following many of them place the item in context for the reader and explain a significance that might otherwise be lost.

Some of Freeman's association copies are spectacular, such as Richard Bentley's *A Dissertation upon the epistles of Phalaris* (1697), inscribed by Bentley to essayist John Evelyn – as well as the enlarged 1699 edition, "inscribed by John Locke... with Locke's penciled notes on rear pastedown." Then there's Thomas Francklin's *The epistles of Phalaris, translated from the Greek* (1749), inscribed by him to the book's dedicatee – John Boyle, fifth Earl of Orrery. Freeman's copy of John Camilton's 1610 *A Discoverie of the Most Secret and Subtile Practises of the Jesuits* bears William Henry Ireland's forged Shakespeare signature on the title page along with notes by "Shakespeare" on other pages. And the list goes on and on and on... *Wow*.

Bibliotheca Fictiva represents a massive, decades-in-the-making collection of artifacts (and, just as important, compilation of scholarship) that must be savored in bits and pieces to be appreciated, so far-reaching is its scope. It's also a classy production itself, a sturdy dust jacketed burgundy clothbound quarto with touches not often seen today, such as a sewn-in silk page marker. No book or autograph person interested in forgeries both sophisticated and absurd that have



dotted the landscape of those fields for many centuries can afford to be without this must-have magnum opus on the subject.

If ever one book made an ideal companion guide to another, it's editor Earle Havens' *Fakes, Lies, and Forgeries: Rare Books and Manuscripts from the Arthur and Janet Freeman Bibliotheca Fictiva Collection*. While I wouldn't call this a *Reader's Digest Condensed Book* version of Freeman's 423-page tome – there's serious learned content here *not* found in *Bibliotheca Fictiva* – at 124 pages it's about a third of the length and a third of the price of the bibliography, so might be viewed as a less formidable, entry-level introduction.

Published by the Sheridan Libraries at Johns Hopkins University, the new academic home for Arthur and Janet Freeman's collection, *Fakes, Lies, and Forgeries* complements *Bibliotheca Fictiva* nicely. There are illustrations here (and they're all in color) as well as scholarly commentary not found in the bibliography. "While it is impossible properly to represent the full contours, breadth, and forensic sophistication of the *Bibliotheca Fictiva* in the space of a single essay, or even in a major exhibition of its contents," writes editor Havens, "it is sufficient to say that what is presented in this catalogue may at least provide an interesting and informative sense of the broader collection...."

Fakes, Lies, and Forgeries is an unusual exhibition catalogue. Instead of presenting a straightforward tour of the exhibit in print form for those who couldn't attend in person, the 62 items exhibited are divided into five groups, each carefully chosen to illustrate certain themes prominent in the collection as a whole. Five prominent scholars provide essays utilizing these items to illustrate their points. Thus editor Havens himself presents "Catastrophe? Species and Genres of Literary and Historical Forgery," Neil Weijer presents "History Reimagined: Filling the Gaps in England's Ancient Past," Walter Stephens presents "Discovering the Past: The Renaissance Arch-Forger and His Legacy," Janet E. Gomez presents "Scandal! Literary Fakes as Best Sellers" and John Hoffmann presents "Forged Identities: Race and Nationhood from the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth Century."

Among the autograph delicacies here that collectors will salivate over are a Martin Luther manuscript concerning the Lord's

Prayer done in the nineteenth century, a supposedly twelfth-century manuscript charter on vellum concerning the Priory of Plessis-Grimoult in Bayeaux formerly believed to bear the only sign manual of Thomas a Beckett, Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre's 1796 *Etudes de la nature* inscribed by Lord Byron (as forged by George de Gibling), a 1769 Autograph Letter Signed from Thomas Chatterton to Horace Walpole defending the authenticity of his "Thomas Rowley" discoveries. These just a few at random....

If Freeman's *Bibliotheca Fictiva: A Collection of Books & Manuscripts Relating to Literary Forgery, 400BC – AD 2000* is your cup o' tea, so too will be Havens' *Fakes, Lies, and Forgeries: Rare Books and Manuscripts from the Arthur and Janet Freeman Bibliotheca Fictiva Collection*. Or vice versa!