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Title	Of Little Consequence: the Early Career of Thomas Moore
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Publication Date	2013
Publication Information	Tonra, Justin (2013) Of Little Consequence: the Early Career of Thomas Moore New Directions in Moore Research
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/3422

Downloaded 2023-03-23T23:26:42Z

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Of Little Consequence: the early career of Thomas Moore.

1

Thomas Moore's first volume of original poetry, *The Poetical Works of the Late Thomas Little, Esq.* (1801), is too often neglected as a juvenile footnote in considerations of his career as a whole. Scholars and critics seem happy to agree with Moore's later disavowals of this early work, viewing it as the trifling effort of a novice working under Anacreontic and Della Cruscan influences before progressing to maturity and to the writings for which he is better known. However, certain aspects of these poems' publication, reception, and influence conferred on them a significance that the mature poet's renunciations could do little to dismiss.

The years from 1800 to 1806 are significant because during this period Moore attempts to manage his literary persona while his reputation as a licentious and immoral poet develops. This reputation endured in varying degrees for much of his writing career, but its origin and Moore's role in creating it have received little critical attention. I will examine here Moore's reasons for adopting the pseudonymous persona of Thomas Little; argue that a particular aspect of the early poems' reception prompted Moore's later revisions and renunciation; and maintain that this phase of Moore's career deserves greater attention, because it presents an image of the poet that is at odds with assessments of his character and work that focus on his politics and nationality.

When *Little* was published in the summer of 1801, Moore was already a fashionable figure in London society. His *Odes of Anacreon* of the previous year has succeeded in establishing his *name*, if not yet his poetic reputation. Moore had achieved this fame as a translator, though what

are now distinctly recognisable elements of his style are evident in his renderings of the ancient verse. In the pseudonymous *Little*, his name appeared nowhere on the page. Only in 1806's *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems* is his name attached to his own work, but this collection is an "awkward jumble" of voices, styles, and themes. Amidst the heteroglossia, we have Moore as erotic versifier, balladeer, poet of the Romantic sublime, patriotic Englishman, and opponent of American republicanism.

2

In the early years of his career, Moore is mobile and elusive. The first three volumes are a diverse testing-ground for his evident prosodic abilities. Having sought patronage in his dedication of *Anacreon* to the Prince of Wales, he also pursued an audience, a poetic form, and a literary reputation.

What, then, were Moore's reasons for adopting a pseudonymous persona for *Little*, rather than exploiting the recognition earned by *Anacreon*? The decision to publish anonymously or pseudonymously has the contradictory outcome of giving emphasis and focus to the rejection and denial of authorship. Moore did not record any private thoughts about his adoption of the Thomas Little persona, but his decision to publish pseudonymously was located somewhere between mischievous irony and a fear that his amorous juvenile compositions would earn critically disapproval, and that his morality and character would be publicly questioned. Moore's awareness of the tensions inherent in rejecting authorship is explicit in the tone and tenor of the remarks of the supposed editor of *Little*'s verses, and in the inclusion within the volume of several gestures aimed at anticipating the objections of the critics. By thus framing his book,

Moore adopted a precautionary principle in an attempt to preserve his reputation and credibility in an age which valued very highly the name and reputation of an author. The negative consequences of the precautionary principle, in this particular case, are that it caused resentment amongst critical reviewers, and explicitly drew attention to those aspects of the work which Moore identified as weak. The positive aspects of the work were thus diminished while reviewers enacted the self-fulfilling prophecy implicit in Moore's precautionary measures.

In creating the persona of Thomas Little, there are three important strategies to note: the first of these is the creation of the character of Little. The volume is presented as the posthumous publication of a poet's verses, and a preface by an unidentified editor gives the reader some context about the purported author's life and influences, and the provenance of the works. The opening lines of this preface establish a defensive justification for the poems, declaring that they "were never intended by the Author to pass beyond the circle of his friends" (iii). The preface continues to inform the reader of Little's biography: that he died at the age of twenty, that these poems are the products of his early years, and that his biography is a necessary requisite to interpretation. In ironic fashion, however, the editor departs immediately from this track to embark on a detailed examination of the respective merits of Ovid, Catullus, and others poets of antiquity that the pseudonymous poet "selected for imitation" (xi). Little makes a brief and belated return at the end of the preface, apparently only to allow the editor to contradict his opening statement: "Where Mr. Little was born, or what is the genealogy of his parents, are points in which very few readers can be interested" (xii). Thus, the reader is left with an elliptical and contrary portrait of Little, in which Moore combines an ironic account of the merits of

biographical interpretation with a rationalising of the shortcomings he saw (or feared critics would see) in his work.

The second factor in Moore's adoption of the pseudonymous persona creates a further layer of distance between the text and his authorship. To further discourage any identification between himself and his fictional persona, Moore interposes the unnamed editor who is the supposed author of the preface and who reappears throughout the volume to offer explanatory notes or comments. In adopting this further layer of concealment, Moore is responding to the necessities of his charade: Little is, after all, deceased, and requires an agent to bring his works to publication. This editor is also vital for the third notable strategy in the volume—the use of autocriticism.

This self-referential criticism is also a feature of Moore's later writings, most effectively executed in the character of Fadladeen from *Lalla Rookh* (1817). This character integrates criticism of the verse into the text, in the same way that the *Little* editor does. His agreement with Little's view of his own verses as "insipid and uninteresting" (iii) is the first of many attempts to forestall criticism by rationalising the apparently poor quality of the verses by referring to their fictitious provenance and private coterie circulation. Like Fadladeen, it is also an ironic anticipation of critics' vocabulary.

In emphasising the young age at which Little died, the editor seeks some clemency in critical judgements of the poems. He claims that they "were written at so early a period, that their errors may claim some indulgence from the critic" (iv) and "were all the productions of an age when

the passions very often give a colouring too warm to the imagination” (v) are evidence that Moore, himself only twenty-one years of age at the time of publication, was acutely aware of both the nature and value of his own juvenile compositions, and of the likely distaste with which they would be received by the critical establishment.

3

So, how did Moore’s pseudonymous and autocritical strategies fare with the critics? The early reviews give some interesting indications about the fate of the volume and the author’s reputation, and all are to some degree concerned with authorial identity: [SLIDE]

These comments suggest a correspondence between the reviewer’s judgment of the merit and morality of the poems and their assessment of the function of the pseudonym. Here, once again, is evidence of the apparently contradictory consequences of adopting the precautionary principle: attention is explicitly drawn to those elements (authorship, in this case) whose effects Moore apparently wished to negate.

A further review in the *British Critic* addressed the autocritical aspects of the persona, noting the intent behind Little’s creation: “with the view, no doubt, of screening the poetry from severe criticism: for who would treat with asperity the defects or errors of a youthful writer after his decease?” (540). The reviewer also agreed with the supposed editor’s precautionary assessments, stating that: “Admissions so candid [. . .] render the task of the critic more pleasing.” But Moore may claim a measure of success for his strategy here: by simply agreeing with the reservations of the Little editor, reviewers criticised the volume on the terms that Moore dictated.

To some degree, Moore succeeds in achieving criticism-by-anticipation, but in the more forensic critical assessments of literature that accompanied the development of the periodical landscape, such motives would undergo close examination instead of being met with harmless acquiescence.

In many respects, the event which best encapsulates *Little*'s role in establishing the early reputation of Moore was not a direct response to that volume: it was Francis Jeffrey's 1806 review of *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems*. This article is vital for a thorough understanding of the early years of Moore's career, as its appearance, and the aborted duel between Moore and Jeffrey which followed mark a watershed in the formation of his reputation and in his development as an author. Jeffrey's review is significant because, it soon becomes clear that it is an assessment not only of *Epistles*, but of the entire career and reputation of Moore to that point [SLIDE]. The article disagreed with the titular emphasis of the volume, and instead chose to focus on the 'Other Poems,' which bore a close thematic and stylistic relation to the *Little* poems. Jeffrey is entirely without mercy in his criticism: the ten-page article was the most public and significant distillation of all of the stray references to the poet's immorality which had appeared in the previous six years.

Jeffrey began his review by noting Moore's technical accomplishments, among which he mentions "a singular sweetness of melody and versification [. . .] brilliancy of fancy [. . .] classical erudition" (456), before hastily moving to the crux of his objections: that the poet's fame is founded not upon these qualities, but on those which make him "the most licentious of modern versifiers" (456). Added to this, Jeffrey continued, is a *conscious attempt* to impose

corruption by Moore, an accusation which was instrumental in the poet's proposal of the duel. Nothing is less forgivable, the reviewer writes, "than a cold-blooded attempt to corrupt the purity of an innocent heart" (465), by a writer who exploits his imagination and ability "for the purpose of insinuating pollution into the minds of unknown and unsuspecting readers" (456). Once again, Jeffrey sought to prove the presence of dishonest intent when he alluded to the vulgarity and "undisguised profligacy" (457) of the works of Rochester and Dryden, which rendered them unappealing to the delicate and impressionable reader. Moore, by contrast, had not the honesty to thus advertise his impropriety, instead mixing it with "exalted feeling and tender emotion" (457) in order to realise his apparently malignant and insidious intent: "It seems to be his aim to impose corruption upon his readers, by concealing it under the mask of refinement" (457).

The decisive differences between the damaging potential of this review and previous articles which made similar claims, are twofold: the accusation of a *deliberate* intent to corrupt, and the identification of the poet allowed by the absence of a pseudonymous poetical persona. With his name printed on the title page, Moore had now to answer for the implications of his writings.

It is tempting to dismiss Jeffrey's review as an hysterical and insignificant diatribe, but in 1806, the *Edinburgh* commanded a great deal of influence and respect in the literary establishment. Moore's awareness of the reach of the journal, and consequent anxiety about his reception therein was evident in advance of the review, when he wrote: "I wait but for the arrival of the Edinburgh Review, and then 'a long farewell to my greatness' [. . .] I shall vanish and be forgotten" (*LTM* 1:101).

Partly motivated by a desire to distance himself from his association with Thomas Little, Moore shifted the focus of his writing to political and satirical verse in 1807, and thence to the *Irish Melodies*, longer poems, and biography. With the publication of Longmans' edition of Moore's ten-volume *Poetical Works* in 1840-41 came the opportunity to re-evaluate and reshape his poetic legacy. Moore seized the chance to revisit and revise some of his previous work: inevitably, *Little* was the focus of much attention from his editorial pencil.

Moore's revision of *Little* has several aspects of interest. The first volume of the *Poetical Works* reprints *Anacreon* in its original form, but the *Little* poems are dispersed throughout a 'Juvenile Poems' section undermining the integrity of the original volume and its central pseudonymous persona. Moore is evidently removing Thomas Little as an identifiable entity from the account of his early career. Though the original *Little* preface is reprinted along with a brief footnote explaining its provenance, there are some subtle changes which create further dissociation from the precautionary strategies of *Little*. The pretence of the *Little* editor is also dropped. Despite the inclusion of the 'editor's preface,' the deconstruction of the original volume's continuity makes the editor's presence in the individual poems redundant. Given what we now know about his precautionary strategies for the 1801 volume, Moore's revisions to portions of the preface that delineate those strategies have a significant resonance. To the claim for the poems that "their author [. . .] wrote as he pleased, careless whether he pleased as he wrote" (iv-v), he now added the qualifying phrase "in general" (254).

Early in 1839, Moore wrote to Thomas Longman to inform him of progress on the revisions of his publications for the *Poetical Works*:

“I have completed the correction of the Anacreon (which cost some trouble) and the castration of the young Mr Little which was done in no time.” (*LTM* 2:842).

The degree of attention and the frequency of correction in the *Little* poems that are included in the *Poetical Works* does not testify to a minor intervention, as his letter suggests. Thirty six complete poems from *Little* were removed; most of which are united by a preponderance of the type of amorous content that attracted most critical attention. Though changes are made to some of the precautionary strategies employed in *Little*, the most frequent and noticeable revisions are made in the service of diminishing the passionate content of the poems. The number of instances where the sexual charge of a “pout” is changed to the modesty of a “smile” are too frequent to recount, but an example will illustrate the nature and extent of Moore’s demure adjustments.

[SLIDE]. Such was Moore’s displeasure with the consequences of his juvenile verses’ publication, that almost forty years later he completed this quiet but substantial disavowal. Moore’s primary aim in revising the *Little* poems for his *Poetical Works* was to punish Little for the role he played in his licentious reputation by overseeing his castration.

4

Though William Hazlitt complained that Moore’s pen lacked the feeling of continued identity, the poet’s public character was similarly fractured. The reputation for licentiousness which he earned in the period from 1800 to 1806 persisted, as did his association with the personae of Anacreon Moore and Thomas Little, but the amorous style and content of the poetry of the period was consciously and definitively abandoned. The writings that came after 1806 complicated the monodimensional conception of Moore as a mere licentious versifier, and contributed to the absence of continued identity which Hazlitt remarked.

That discontinuity is also evident in the heteroglossia and multiple personae of Moore's first three publications. But in these volumes, one identity is conspicuously absent. Irish topics scarcely receive a single mention in his first three volumes, and *Epistles*, with its distinctly Federalist viewpoint, could be mistaken for the work of a staunch and defiant Englishman. If we imagine Moore's death on the morning of the duel with Jeffrey in August 1806 (just as *Little* is his own imagining of his poetic legacy had he died at 20), we can be certain that posterity would not view him as an Irish poet. His youthful association with Robert Emmet and the United Irishmen would be viewed as an aberration in the life of an amorous poet, London society figure, and opponent of American democracy.

Not being granted the luxury of a mature revision of his early poems (or his views on America from *Epistles*), how else might Moore have been viewed? The Jeffrey review of *Epistles* would have assumed the form of an obituary: the final word on his licentious reputation and character.

The irony here is clear: in actively seeking to manipulate the formation of his poetic reputation through the use of a pseudonymous persona, Moore came perilously close to becoming that very persona. In his survival beyond 1806, we can see both the endurance of the early reputation, and Moore's determined efforts to overcome and refashion it.

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3 May 2013