The British Academy

Journal of the British Academy, 10: 135–155
https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010.135
Posted 8 December 2022

Thomas Chatterton: four ways of literary terra-forming

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Chatterton Lecture on Poetry, 19 May 2022

Abstract
This article considers how the 18th-century poet Thomas Chatterton created literary worlds by examining and revealing the connections between four very different areas in which he 'terra-formed': mediaevalism, political satire, anti-slavery poetry, and environmentalism. Although these areas of Chatterton's writing are usually treated separately by critics, the article argues that they in fact share many common features, and between them characterise Chatterton's distinctive – if extraordinarily precocious – poetic voices. These shared characteristics have, moreover, been brought into sharp relief by pressing current issues, from the traumas of the pandemic to the debates on the commemoration (and misrepresentation) of historical figures such as Edward Colston and indeed Chatterton himself. The article concludes by showing how readers can find in the poetry of Thomas Chatterton not only an unexpected influence on some of the major cultural touchstones of the 21st century, but contemporary significance and relevance through the consolation of literature.

Keywords
Thomas Chatterton, 18th-century poetry, literary creativity, mediaevalism, political satire, anti-slavery poetry, environmentalism, commemoration, cultural influence.

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In ‘Resolution and Independence’, the poet William Wordsworth famously celebrated Thomas Chatterton as ‘the marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride’ (ll. 43–4).[1] Wordsworth took the metre of ‘Resolution and Independence’ from Chatterton’s poem ‘An Excelente Balade of Charitie’, and also reflected upon its theme of rescue from dejection. It was reading Wordsworth during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, that led me to think about the poetry of Thomas Chatterton in different ways. In particular, about how literature – and poetry in particular – can contribute positively to health and wellbeing during challenging times.

Thomas Chatterton – or at least his afterlife – has suffered from Covid-19, insofar as the commemorative events planned for 2020, the 250th anniversary of his untimely death, were severely curtailed by coronavirus restrictions. Various groups in Bristol such as Bristol Ideas, the Church of St Mary Redcliffe, and Bristol Libraries did nevertheless manage to launch initiatives and host events in the teeth of the pandemic, yet despite the efforts of many people, the tired myths concerning Chatterton’s life and work remain tenacious. I am not going to rehearse those canards again here, but I will instead briefly summarise some salient points about his life as context to his work.[2]

Thomas Chatterton was born on 20 November 1752 in the writing master’s house of Pile Street School, opposite the Church of St Mary Redcliffe.[3] He was educated at Edward Colston’s bluecoat school, and he became fascinated by various old documents his father had collected from the church. The young Chatterton gathered more scraps of vellum from the muniment room over the north porch of the church (now the Chatterton Room), and from these fragments he began to weave a vast tapestry of 15th-century Redcliffe – literature and dramatic pageants, antiquarian collecting and folklore, commerce and trade. It was as if he had found a handful of pieces of a lost jigsaw and now set about reconstructing the whole puzzle, providing a comprehensive account of mediaeval life. Chatterton produced an enormous body of mediaevalist work – from poetry and plays to business correspondence, from heraldic designs to architectural sketches to translations of earlier Anglo-Saxon epics supposedly rediscovered in the 1460s. And in all this history and culture Chatterton was self-taught: not being able to afford his own books, he joined a library and lingered in bookshops, reading.

At the same time he was trying his hand at a variety of contemporary writing styles, and as his confidence grew he began sending pieces to London journals. By April 1770 – at the age of less than 17½ – he had had 31 pieces published in seven different journals: that in itself is an extraordinary achievement.[4] So he went to London to make his name – and four months later he was dead. Chatterton died on the night of 24 August, and his body was discovered the next morning. His death was ruled a *non compos mentis* suicide, which has unfortunately tarnished and overwhelmed his reputation and become an obstinate myth. Yet it is highly unlikely that Chatterton took his own life – his death was more probably an accident resulting from mixing medications.[5]

[1] Wordsworth (1994: 153–8, at 155).
[2] An unfortunate example being ‘ILYA’ (2020).
[3] The birthplace has a chequered history: see Groom (2003: 6–7); the building is currently an independent cafe named after the poet.
[4] See Suarez (1999: 96–118).
[5] See Groom (2004). Chatterton’s memorandum book was found to be stained with an opiate (laudanum) when it was forensically analysed in 1947: see Meyerstein (1950: 46–9); Gates & Doble (2020). The idea was first seriously mooted by Holmes in 1970: see Holmes (2001: 45–6); Taylor (1952); Groom (2005).

He has since been celebrated by a rich and varied readership, evident from the writings and artworks and even music that he has inspired – exhaustively researched by John Goodridge and published online as 'Rowley's Ghost'.[6] Thomas Chatterton therefore lives on in many imaginative worlds, but the aim of this article is to consider how he created literary worlds, bringing together his various poetic visions of contemporary politics, mediaeval Redcliffe, African mythology, and environmentalism: treating him, in other words, as an experimental poet and writer.

1. Mediaevalism

Chatterton's mediaevalist works were written primarily in the persona of Thomas Rowley, supposedly a 15th-century Bristolian monk, and discovered, so Chatterton claimed, in the muniment room over the north porch of the Church of St Mary Redcliffe. The Rowley works really comprise a corpus of a miscellaneous documents – poetry, plays, letters, memoirs, accounts, catalogues, maps, translations – all written by Rowley and his circle, and annotated by Chatterton in the guise of a sometimes deliberately ill-informed editor. The texts make frequent cross-references to other writings both within and outside the Rowley corpus, as well as to places in and around Bristol, contemporary historical events and earlier English history, and to details of, for example, architecture, numismatics, and heraldry. The Rowley works are, moreover, remarkable for being written in Chatterton's very distinctive 'mediaevalish' language of distinctively archaic spellings and syntax, arresting neologisms, and peppered with explanatory notes; sometimes he even penned 'originals' in a peculiar and almost unreadable calligraphic hand on distressed scraps of ancient vellum, occasionally decorated with drawings.

As an example, these are lines 31–40 of 'Eclogue the Third', spoken by Syr Rogerre:

> The sweltrie[1] Sonne dothe hie apace hys Wayne.[2]
> Frō everich beme, a seme[3] of lyfe doe falle;
> Swythyn[4] scille[5] oppe the haie uponne the Playne,
> Methynckes the Cocks begynneth to gre[6] talle:
> Thys ys alyche oure Doome,[7] the greate, the smalle,
> Moste withe[8] and be forwyned[9] by Deathis darte;
> See the swote[10] flourette[11] hathe noe swote at alle;
> Itte wythe the ranke wede berethe evalle[12] parte,
> The Cravent,[13] Warriour, and the Wyse be blent:[14]
> Alyche to drie awaie, with those theie did bemente.[15]

[1] sultry [2] Car [3] Seed [4] Quickly presently [5] gather [6] grow [7] Fate
[8] a Contraction of wither – [9] dried: [10] Sweete [11] flower [12] equal [13] Coward
[14] ceased, dead, no more, – [15] lament

The lines are in the Spenserian stanza, very atypical of the period; the footnotes are Chatterton's own.[7] Note the tittle in the second line indicating a missing letter; Chatterton also used underlining to double letters.[8]

[6] Goodridge (2020).
[7] Chatterton (2003: 58–62); Chatterton (1971: i. 312–15).
[8] The text is taken from Chatterton (2003: 60), which preserves elements such as the tittle; that aside, the transcription corresponds with that in Chatterton (1971: i. 313); the copy-text for both is British Library, Add. MS 24890, fos 8v–11v.

This is uncompromising, ruthless mediaevalism: the words march in fantastical armour, prickling with annotations, to confront the reader. Perhaps no other poetry in English is so difficult to read: there are unique spellings and an invented vocabulary so unfamiliar that a second authorial figure has provided explanatory footnotes. But the difficulty is part of the process of reading – one learns to read again. Reading Chatterton is an ongoing process of recognition – recognising the familiar words hidden beneath the spikiness. And yet at the same time it *is* a different world: these words are like riddles that slowly give up their secrets. This is slow reading: it makes the reader work, and so should be approached as an active engagement, as academic detective work, even as role-play. It is adult medievalism – not a childish sentimentalisation of the past, but something supremely challenging. In other words, the Rowley works are immersive in their language (neologisms and orthography), form (metre, script, and physical state), subject matter (with Rowleyan intertextuality and cross-references to Redcliffean and English and Welsh history), as well as being laced with deliberate mistakes to ensnare the reader. And what emerges from this experience is a different world.

What is this world? Substituting more modern English for Chatterton's language, the words are stripped of their lavish elaboration, surfacing with a clearer, if far flatter, meaning:

> The sultry sun doth speed apace his car.
> From every beam, a seed of life doth fall;
> Now gather up the hay upon the plain,
> Methinks the [hay]cocks beginneth to grow tall:
> This is alike our fate, the great, the small,
> Must wither and be parch'd by Death his dart;
> See that sweet flower hath no sweetness at all;
> It with the rank weed beareth equal part,
> The craven, warrer, and the wise be gone:
> Alike to wilt away, with those they did bemoan.[9]

This paraphrase clearly fails to capture the most striking and disorientating characteristics of the original, in which familiar words are not simply defamiliarised, but twisted into strange shapes; disarticulated, refashioned, and transformed.[10]

Chatterton's outstanding achievement here is the play 'Ælla', consisting of 1,365 lines of Rowleyan verse – about 420 lines shorter than the full text Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, but longer than many 18th-century adaptations of Shakespeare plays: it is an astonishingly sustained achievement, and although it has never been staged, a performance delivered at a normal pace would approach a very respectable ninety minutes. But 'Ælla' is more than a historical drama, it is a *tour-de-force* of imaginative creation: it is as if J.R.R. Tolkien had written *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5) entirely in Elvish, and looks forward to the 'shadow tongue' that Paul Kingsnorth developed for his novel *The Wake* (2014), while foreshadowing the mesmerising obscurity of William Blake's prophetic books – if far more extreme than any of these analogies.[11] In that sense it is what today might be called 'experimental art', and even if readers lack the intellectual and imaginative

[9] The text is my own, but due to Chatterton's use of neologisms it is impossible paraphrase elegantly or even accurately; notwithstanding this, the mediaeval scholar Walter W. Skeat attempted a half-translated version of Chatterton's Rowley poems in Chatterton (1872: ii. 205), in doing so reducing Chatterton's explanatory gloss of these ten lines from fifteen footnotes to six.

[10] In this sense, the Rowley works are an 'object': on the impossibility of paraphrasing, see Harman (2012: 232–60).

[11] See Kingsnorth, 'A Note on Language' (2014: 353–6).

stamina to study and make sense of it, 'Ælla' nevertheless stands as a literary artefact: an object of strange and alienated beauty.

As one unravels or decodes Chatterton's Rowleyan language there are unexpected surprises – one keeps finding new things. One hitherto unrecognised feature is that Chatterton's 'mediaevalish' language does not simply revive and rework old words he found, for example, in glosses to Chaucer or in early dictionaries – he often chooses a word with a modern inflection as well: words that are simultaneously mediaeval relics (his words are very much *things* – material objects) *and* contemporary slang. This has two purposes: first, it can re-ignite an everyday 18th-century usage by mixing into it something more ancient, something legendary. At least three times, for example, Chatterton uses the word 'Morglaien': in 'Battle of Hastings', the Anglo-Saxon knight Campynon 'drewe hys steele Morglaien sworde so stronge' (l. 80) and later in the same poem he 'Seezed a huge swerde Morglaien yn his honde' (l. 133); similarly, in 'Englysh Metamorphosis' there is the line 'A burled Trojan lepes, wythe Morglaien sweerde yn honde' (l. 20; Chatterton glosses 'burled' as 'armed'); and in 'The Romaunte of the Cnyghte', 'Wythe Morglaie hys Foemenne to make blede' (l. 316, where Chatterton glosses the word as 'a fatal Sword').[12] But what is a 'Morglaien sword' – is a 'Morglaien sword' an invention, like Lewis Carroll's 'vorpal sword'?[13] No: the word is in Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological Dictionary*, first published in 1721: *Morglay*, 'a Mortal and deadly Sword' – it was in fact the named sword of the legendary hero Bevis of Hampton.[14] But the *New Canting Dictionary* of 1725 also defines *morglag* as a slang term for 'a Watchman's brown Bill; as Glaives, are Bills or Swords'.[15] The characteristic weapon is, in other words, dignified and elevated by association, and Chatterton artfully, if almost imperceptibly, reminds the reader of the mediaeval ancestry of the 18th-century watch.

But Chatterton also has a more subtle purpose in revealing these hidden meanings. In the short piece 'The Goulers Requiem' – a *gouler* [govler] or gaveller being a usurer or miser – the gouler laments that 'For thee, O goulde! I dyd the Lawe ycrase' (l. 16), and ends by declaring 'I to the Qwood muste goe' (l. 20).[16] Chatterton glosses 'ycrase' as 'Break', and 'Qwood' as 'The Devil', having adapted the word from *Queed* – again found in Bailey's *Dictionary* and indeed meaning the Devil. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also has *quede* meaning the same, deriving the usage from a word for dung and quoting Chatterton's line as the last usage. The *New Canting Dictionary*, however, includes the word *quod*, defined as '*Newgate*; also any Prison, tho' generally for Debt': by 1812 *quod* had become a verb, and by 1850 criminals were referred to as *quodlings*.[17] In other words, the miser is not just figuratively going to the devil, he may also literally be going to gaol for financial crimes, just as he fears.

It transpires that Chatterton knew his slang. *Green's Dictionary of Slang* has twenty-eight citations of Chatterton's use of slang terms, all of which occur in his journalism, satires, and fashionable work – in comparison, his contemporary the satirist Charles Churchill has only three citations, and even John Wilkes only twenty-one, twenty of which are examples of common usage

[12] Chatterton (2003: 10, 12, 36); Chatterton (1971: i. 85, 86, 279); see also 'The Romaunte of the Cnyghte': Chatterton (1971: i. 331).

[13] Carroll, 'Jabberwocky' (1998: 132).

[14] Bailey (1721); see also the almanack *Poor Robin* (1714: [44]); 'News from Newcastle': Dryden & Tonson (1716: iv. 304–307, at 307).

[15] *New Canting Dictionary* (1725).

[16] Chatterton (2003: 40); Chatterton (1971: i. 290).

[17] *Green's Dictionary of Slang*.

taken from his *Essay on Woman* (1763). Chatterton's previously unacknowledged use of slang in his Rowley works suggests how keenly he wanted to show the slippage between the worlds of Redcliffe in the 1460s and Britain in the 1760s.

But what of our contemporary perspective? Is mediaevalism really relevant to the 21st-century digital world of smartphones and the internet? Twenty years ago, Peter Jackson completed his three-film series of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), and in the process revolutionised Hollywood; in the last decade, the TV series *Game of Thrones* ran for eight seasons and won widespread popularity (2011–19); in September of 2022 possibly the most expensive TV series yet made will be the Amazon Prime Video series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* – again based on Tolkien.[18] So mediaevalist world-building – what could be called terra-forming – has defined moving-image popular culture for at least the past two decades. It is, as professor of film Barna Donovan has commented, 'aimed squarely at adults, and it is not campy, self-referential, or comical. It basically does what serious science fiction and fantasy have always done, functioning as a symbolic commentary on the main social and political issues of the day'.[19] Some twenty years ago the critic Tom Shippey said the same about Tolkien, whose three-volume novel was first published in the 1950s: like contemporaries such as George Orwell and William Golding, Tolkien had been 'traumatised' by his experiences of modern warfare and expressed this, if obliquely, through his fiction.[20]

George R.R. Martin has criticised the 'Disneyland' version of Middle Ages predominant in earlier fantasy writers, especially in, for example, the lack of attention to class systems.[21] For the critic Carol Jamison, Martin's work is 'distinguished by the comprehensiveness of his medievalism', with 'meticulous details about governance, historical background, and even the literature of Westeros, creating a comprehensive pseudo-medieval world'.[22] On the other hand, Martin's work has also been criticised because, at least until the TV series, his languages had no linguistic integrity, which was something that Tolkien laboured over during almost his entire adult life.[23] Bearing in mind that Chatterton's Rowley work was written over some nine months and before he was seventeen years of age, his evolving language and lexicon of new or adapted words, not to mention the level of detail he manages to include in political and cultural networks, historical background, and the art and architecture of mediaeval Bristol, is simply astounding. Immersive mediaevalist fantasy really begins with Chatterton.

Like these later world-builders, then, Chatterton does not 'escape' into the Middle Ages: rather, he plays out contemporary issues in a medieval setting: problems of political power and conflict, identity politics (particularly racial identities and legitimacy), and commercial society and trade, reworking English history from a Bristolian perspective. And through what is effectively an archive of texts rather than a single 'Rowley' work, Chatterton weaves real history into his creation, giving a sense of depth and therefore of reality, and revealing how we make sense of the world through competing versions of the past, through different perspectives and alternative narratives.

[18] See Fitzpatrick (2019).
[19] Walton (2014).
[20] Shippey (2000: xxix–xxx).
[21] Hodgeman (2011).
[22] Jamison (2017: 134).
[23] Preston (2019).

Chatterton also introduces multiple characters, some of whom are authors themselves providing multiple points of view.[24] Tolkien and Martin adopt the same strategy – it is part of the imaginary or 'secondary' world: Tolkien names nearly a thousand characters in Middle-Earth, while Martin features more than twice that number in his books, creating manifold and proliferating threads that are intellectually and emotionally stimulating – what has been described as 'cognitively engaging'.[25] Chatterton also uses different media – poems, plays, histories, letters, memoranda, accounts, genealogies, illustrations – to build his archive and give a sense of exploration and limitless scope. In doing so, he pushes literary conventions so that editorial work and translation, as well as the material condition of a text – aged ink on vellum fragments – all become part of the textual vision: his work is brimming with what philosopher Graham Harman calls 'additional reality'.[26] As Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner have shown, the term *mediaevalism* was not coined until 1844 and so, at least for Chatterton, this was a retrospective assessment.[27] What Chatterton was doing had yet to be given a name – one reason that critics have often resorted to condemning it as 'forgery' – but it is surely more challenging to see him mixing different versions of what was to become mediaevalism (or mediaevalisms): he is not only recrafting language but incorporating legends into his histories and history into his literature, blending the fictional with the factual. Furthermore, Chatterton also presents Rowley as a translator of earlier Anglo-Saxon work – translations for which there was no original – just as Chatterton himself, posing as editor, made transcriptions of manuscripts that did not exist. It is *uncanny* – the unfamiliar in the familiar – except that the meaning of that loaded word as 'uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar' was also not recorded either until the 1840s. The earlier meanings of *uncanny* include 'Unreliable, not to be trusted' (1639–1724, now obsolete) and 'Of persons: Not quite safe to trust to, or have dealings with, as being associated with supernatural arts or powers' (first recorded three years after Chatterton's death) – these definitions do come closer to Chatterton's Rowley work, but they are uncanny meanings of *uncanny*.[28]

The Rowley archive is, then, like a hall of mirrors in which perceived meaning is persistently reflected but elusive, or alternatively a huge thought experiment on the nature of literature posed as a series of antique riddles. The Rowley world shows history to be relative: the corpus of texts challenges the idea that there is a fixed historical point from which past events make sense, because neither the perspectives of the 15th century (Rowley) nor the 11th century (in Rowley's translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem on the Battle of Hastings) nor the 8th century (in his translation of verses by Bishop Ecca) are allowed to stabilise, and so likewise the perspectives of the 18th century (Chatterton's contemporary readers) and the 21st century (readers today) dissolve. To put it another way, the 8th-century Ecca is translated by the 15th-century Rowley (who also translates 11th-century verse), this is then 'edited' by 18th-century Chatterton and read today in the 21st century – there are four relative viewpoints here, and of course things become further complicated when Chatterton introduces different writers, and we also have 250 years of reception by the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Oscar Wilde to Pete Doherty – what amounts to a community of the entranced and the perplexed. But if Chatterton does have an overall

[24] For example, *The World of Ice & Fire* is a history of Westeros allegedly composed by Maester Yandel; for Tolkien's multiple authors see Groom (2022: 167–9).
[25] See LotrProject website; Josué Cardona, quoted by Walton (2014).
[26] Harman (2010: 103).
[27] Parker & Wagner (2020: 2); Matthews (2015: 165, 171).
[28] See *OED*; Bennett & Royle, 'The Uncanny' (2004: 34–41).

aim, it is in exploring the social bonds and identities that tie people together rather than divide them, and so much of the Rowley work concerns friendship, community, and charity. These themes break through the layers of ambiguity and multifarious meanings to touch a common humanity in the same way that the episode of my Uncle Toby rescuing the fly does in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and which may speak to us today.[29]

2. Political satire

Chatterton's challenge to the reader is also apparent – in different ways – in his political satire, doggerel verse and deliberately mannered diction that is by turns mischievous, arch, and scurrilous. 'The Constabiliad', for example, is a poem on a civic dinner of Bristol's constables. A character with the ridiculous name of Bumbulkins (a name that puns on a slang obscenity, *bumbo*, stressed on the second syllable) starts throwing food at one Thrimso, who is proposing toasts to the Kings of Ancient Britain (Uther, Arthur). First, Bumbulkins hurls a pigeon, then calls him a cowardly custard (a custard pie is indeed thrown a hundred lines later), and finally knocks him down with a leg of veal:

> Furious he started Rage his Bosom warms
> Loud as his backward Thunder thus he storms
> Thou puling Insect of a Custard made
> Soft as the green Materials of thy Trade
> This to thy Head the great Bumbulkins sends
> His massy Body to the Table bends
> With straining Arms uprears a Loin of Veal
> In these degenerate days for three a Meal
> In days of old as various Writers say
> An Alderman or Priest eat three a Day
> With Godlike Strength the brave Bumbulkins plies
> His stretching Muscles and the Mountain flies
> Swift as a Cloud that shadows oer the Plain[30]
> It flew and scatter'd drops of oily Rain
> In opposition to extended Knives
> On Giant Thrimso's Breast the Mountain drives
> He thunders senseless to the sandy Ground
> Prest with the Steamy Load that ooz'd around[.] (ll. 41–58, unpunctuated in original)[31]

Chatterton's political satires are accretive: he writes one satire, then builds on it, adapting the lines to new circumstances and new public figures – or so it seems. When Chatterton got to London he reworked the entire poem as 'The Consuliad' to attack politicians there – he had realised that the food fight was a one-size-fits-all way to mock greed and degeneracy (especially as Chatterton himself was an abstemious vegetarian). Now it is one Twitcher who assaults Madoc for his toasts (the major changes are indicated in *italics*):

[29] Rudd (2020: 74–97); Sterne (1986: 131).
[30] 'Narva and Mored' (see below) has a trio of similar lines: 'Swift as the elk they pour along the plain; / Swift as the flying clouds distilling rain. / Swift as the boundings of the youthful roe' (ll. 27–9).
[31] Chatterton (2003: 69); Chatterton (1971: i. 395–6. For custard-pie jokes in English poetry, see Chatterton (2003: 101); Morton, (1999: 79–95).

> Furious he started, rage his bosom warms;
> Loud as his *lordship's morning duns* he storms.
> Thou *vulgar imitator of the great,*
> *Grown wanton with the excrements of state:*
> This to thy Head, *notorious Twitcher* sends.
> His *shadow* body to the table bends:
> *His* straining arms uprears a loin of veal,
> In these degenerate days for three a meal:
> In *ancient times*, as various writers say,
> An alderman or priest eat three a day.
> With godlike strength, the *grinning Twitcher* plies
> His stretching muscles, and the mountain flies.
> Swift, as a cloud that shadows o'er the plain,
> It flew; and scatter'd drops of oily rain.
> In opposition to extended knives,
> On *royal Madoc's spreading chest it* drives:
> *Senseless he falls upon* the sandy ground
> Prest with the steaming load that ooz'd around. (ll. 53–70)[32]

'The Constabiliad' was not published until 1971, but the revised 'Consuliad' appeared in *The Freeholder's Magazine* for January 1770, which supported the radical firebrand John Wilkes. Chatterton was paid half a guinea, equivalent to over two weeks' basic wage at the time.[33] Modifying the earlier poem was partly simple expedience to make the most of unpublished material – Chatterton's later satire 'Kew Gardens', for example, combines four earlier political poems – but it also demonstrated how political satires could hint at characters and caricatures without needing to be specific: the detail was supplied by the reader.

In 'The Consuliad', then, it is not clear who Bumbulkins and Twitcher, Thrimso and Madoc actually are – although a reasonable suggestion would be that Twitcher is John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich who had led the prosecution of Wilkes in 1763 and was indeed nick-named Jemmy Twitcher after the character in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728). But that is all: one indication that this is a pro-Wilkes piece – indeed Horace Walpole later commented that 'The Consuliad' is 'quite unintelligible, and was probably written in entire ignorance of the persons he meant to satirize'.[34] But that is the point. Chatterton is taking Alexander Pope's satirical technique, employed to such savage effect in *The Dunciad*, in a different direction. Pope named his targets, and so when the first version of *The Dunciad* had appeared a generation earlier in 1728, the poet Richard Savage reported that, 'On the day the book was first vended, a crowd of authors beseiged the shop; entreaties, advices, threats of law, and battery, nay cries of treason were all employ'd to hinder the coming out of The Dunciad: on the other side, the booksellers and hawkers made as great efforts to procure it.'[35] As Donald Taylor observes, Chatterton knew that when it came to the turbulent politics of the period, '[Patriot] readers could find their favourite conspiracies in any text'.[36] So by not identifying his characters with specific individuals, Chatterton leaves the text open for readers to fill the

[32] Chatterton (1971: i. 437).
[33] Chatterton (1971: ii. 1029).
[34] Walpole (1937–83: xvi. 346).
[35] Savage, 'Dedication' (1777: ii. 244).
[36] Chatterton (1971: ii. 1029).

gaps.[37] The reader is being given a literary puzzle that has no precise answer, a labyrinth with no single – but perhaps many possible – solutions, solutions that are independent of the writer; it is playful and teasing, disconcerting and frustrating. Such ambiguity is to be savoured, not explained away – just as it is in his mediaevalist work. Moreover, the joke for Chatterton is that a satire on Bristol provides the template for a satire on London, subordinating the capital to the regional.

3. Anti-slavery

I will now turn to a very different aspect of Chatterton's work: his anti-slavery poetry, written in the first half of 1770. Chatterton was one of the earliest English poets to attack 18th-century slavery and the European slave trade – according to Brycchan Carey, he has 'a good claim to be Bristol's first antislavery poet' – and he did so from what appears to be an entirely original perspective: he concentrated solely on the experience of Africans, writing a number of 'African Eclogues' that make sense of the world from a non-white-European viewpoint.[38] This is a sensitive area, but trust that my comments on the attitudes of a young English poet of the 1760s are reasonable. It would, I think, be anachronistic to accuse Chatterton of 'cultural appropriation' – not least as he was writing at a time when there was virtually no Black literary tradition in English, and he died three years before Phillis Wheatley's founding collection of African American written verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773).[39] But what is important about Chatterton's 'African Eclogues' is the way in which the western European slave trade is seen as a *peripheral* (if accelerating) threat to vibrant African cultures. In other words, Chatterton relegates the white European perspective to the margin, just as he moves 1760s Bristol to the margin in his depiction of 15th-century Redcliffe. These shifts in perception simultaneously disorientate and engage the reader, opening up new panoramas of literary creativity as well as enlightened humanitarianism. Just short of eight weeks before he died Chatterton described two of his 'African Eclogues' ('Narva and Mored' and 'The Death of Nicou') as 'the only two Pieces I have the Vanity to Call Poetry'.[40]

In the first eclogue, 'Heccar and Gaira', the threat of enslavement is central to the narrative, yet at the same time it is offstage – it has already occurred and is now the bitterest of memories.[41] The poem begins with two warriors, Heccar the 'Chief of Jarra's fruitful Hill' (l. 11) and Gaira 'the King of warring Archers' (l. 15) – as he does in his Rowley works, Chatterton adds elusive, unknowable detail such as 'Jarra's fruitful Hill', and also in the poem there is the river Caigra and the places Eascal and Jagir, names probably adapted from atlas entries mapping the western African

[37] John Dryden had referred to the playwright Thomas Shadwell as 'Sh—' in the authorised text of 'MacFlecknoe' (1684), and later satirists often disguised their targets either by withholding letters from their names, or by rechristening them – but these were transparent disguises; Chatterton's characters, in contrast, are deliberate blank canvases: Dryden (1987: 878).

[38] Carey (2015: 99); Chatterton (1971: ii. 1028). James Basker traces the vogue for 'African eclogues' that 'gave voice and romantic personal histories to African captives' to William Dodd's 'African Prince' (1749) and 'Zara' (1749), considering that Chatterton exemplifies such work (2002: xl). There are, however, very few precursors to Chatterton's distinctive 'African Eclogues', and several poems written in the 1760s, such as 'The African Boy', Edward Jerningham's child's-eye view of a mother's enslavement, were not printed until much later: Basker (2002: 160–62).

[39] The first African American poet to be published was Jupiter Hammon in 1761, and Phillis Wheatley had already published various pieces before her pioneering collection appeared in 1773; there was also an African American oral tradition of poetry, dating from a piece by Lucy Terry composed in 1746: Basker (2002: 137–9, 170–76).

[40] Letter to Thomas Cary (1 July 1770): Chatterton (1971: i. 641); see Taylor (1978: 302–11).

[41] Chatterton (2003: 74–7); Chatterton (1971: i. 432–5).

coast.[42] Heccar and Gaira are lying exhausted after slaughtering white slavers, the 'reeking Slain' are 'pil'd in Mountains on the sanguine sand' (l. 35), their bones already bleaching, 'mantled in silver White' (ll. 23, 35, 39). Heccar dismisses the slavers as weak and frightened, driven by guilt, almost invisible in the African sun – 'Their less'ning forms elude the straining Eye' (l. 21). The white man is the one being 'hunted' here:

> The Children of the Wave whose palid race
> Views the faint Sun display a languid face
> From the red fury of thy Justice fled
> Swifter than Torrents from their rocky bed
> Fear with a sick'ned Silver ting'd their hue
> The guilty fear when Vengeance is their due[.] (ll. 41–6)

The line 'Fear with a sick'ned Silver ting'd their hue' describing blood-draining terror of the slavers is not only ominously striking – they change colour from spectral white to an ashen grey – it is also in direct contrast to Gaira's wife, Cawna, who is celebrated for her 'sable Charms' – her black skin:

> Soft, as the cooling Murmur of the Gales
> Majestic as the many color'd Snake
> Trailing his Glorys thro' the blossom'd brake
> Black as the glossy Rocks where Eascal roars
> Foaming thro' sandy Wastes to Jagirs Shores[.] (ll. 52–6)[43]

One may respond that this is the all-too predictable objectification of an exotic woman as a noble savage, yet Chatterton's Cawna is not only in juxtaposition to the cadaverous slavers, but is presented as a positive and commanding force – as vivid life, at one with her land, and as resplendently serpentine as Shakespeare's Cleopatra – rather than being negatively 'othered'.[44] Although there are precursors – notably Isaac Teale's passionate ode *The Sable Venus* published in Jamaica in 1765 – Chatterton's lines of praise were nonetheless written a generation before the terrible public scrutiny and treatment of Sara Baartman, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus'.[45] Despite her alluring beauty, however, Cawna and her children have been seized and they 'In common slav'ry [drag] the hated Chain' (l. 86). The poem ends as Heccar and Gaira plan further revenge.[46]

The second eclogue, 'Narva and Mored', offers an insight into an imagined African belief system (the second syllable in *Mored* is stressed).[47] In October of 1769, *The Town and Country Magazine* had carried a brief and dismissive article on 'OBSERVATIONS *of the Manners*, &c. *of the* Africans', written by a Bristol doctor, lately deceased. The anonymous author of these 'Observations' gives an account of religious rites he has witnessed – highly contemptuous, if thoroughly typical for the period – calling the priest 'ridiculous' and the people 'barbarous'.[48] Chatterton, in contrast, is dignified and respectful – the gulf between the two texts, 'Observations' and 'Narva and Mored', is vast. In Chatterton's poem, the priest serves 'Chalma's triple idol',

[42] Taylor, who places the sites around the Gulf of Guinea: Chatterton (1971: ii. 1027).
[43] Noted by Richardson (1996: 69).
[44] Alluding to 'Serpent of old Nile' in *Antony and Cleopatra*, I. v. 25: Shakespeare (1988).
[45] Crais & Scully (2010); Basker (2002: 146–9).
[46] For an excellent discussion of vengeance in the poem, see Michasiw (2008); Wood also provides helpful comments in his introduction to the poem: (2003: 72–6).
[47] Chatterton (2003: 82–4); Chatterton (1971: i. 543–5).
[48] [Anon.,] (1769: 520).

a version of the Trinity, and Chalma's 'excellence is known from far' (ll. 2, 15). Again we have details of place names – Banny, Lupa, Calabar, Lorbar, Toddida, Zira – names that are woven into the landscape:

> Where the soft Togla creeps along the meads,
> Thro' scented Calamus and fragrant reeds;
> Where the sweet Zinsa spreads its matted bed[.] (ll. 87–9)

There is the same delight in new words here that one also finds in Rowley. There are animals too – elk, roe, elephant, macaw, hooting adders – flowers of 'blue blossom' (l. 19) and 'Gingers aromatic matted root' (l. 21; Chatterton being perhaps the first poet to use root ginger in poetry).[49] Chatterton's imagined Africa is celebrated for its linguistic richness, the vigour and fertility of its flora and fauna, and the vivacity of its people.

The scene is a funeral celebration of Narva and Mored, a celebration that presents a spectrum of African activities, from a glimpse inside a 'sacerdotal cave' (l. 48) to the aesthetics of crafting weapons and *objets d'arts* in a workshop; meanwhile, western slavers ('the pale children of the feeble sun', l. 55) are, in an aside, pitied for their pursuit of mere gold, condemning them to 'live in all vicissitudes of woe' (l. 58). The final memorial oration is delivered by a Priestess, who sings a bardic lament, elevating Narva and Mored to the shared cultural memory of the community and the grace of the living god Chalma. Again, Chatterton stresses the beauty of the couple: Narva is as beautiful as dawn over a sparkling sea, Mored is a 'still sweeter flow'r' (l. 90). Again, Chatterton dwells on her skin, 'Soft as the moss' and as black 'as Togla's hidden cell'. Similarly, in 'An African Song', a companion piece written as a duet between Narva and Mored and published in 1770, Mored's beauty evokes that of Cawna:

> Black is that skin as winter's skies;
> Sparkling and bright those rolling eyes,
> As is the venom'd snake. (ll. 41–3)[50]

Both Narva and Mored speak in the 'Song', indeed Mored is given more than half the lines.

The celebrant of Narva and Mored in the eclogue is a Priestess, who also has a dominant speaking role:

> Now rest the souls of Narva and Mored,
> Laid in the dust, and number'd with the dead.
> Dear are their memories to us, and long,
> Long, shall their attributes be known in song.
> Their lives were transient as the meadow flow'r,
> Ripen'd in ages, wither'd in an hour. (ll. 69–74)

This oration mixes memories of Narva and Mored with visions of African landscapes. In total it is 40 lines long, meaning that nearly 40 per cent of this poem is in the direct speech of an African woman. As the compiler and custodian of communal memory and identity, then, the Priestess plays the central role. She is also non-judgemental. Narva had been a trainee priest when he fell in love with Mored; desperate, they drowned themselves in a suicide pact – but Chatterton's African society evidently treats self-killing with infinitely more compassion than did the English legal system and the Anglican church of his time.

[49] See Groom (2010: 50); this essay also comments on the post-colonial dimension to this poem (43).
[50] Chatterton (1971: i. 662–3).

It was because he believed that Chatterton had taken his own life that the Revd Cartwright of St Mary Redcliffe dismantled the statue of Thomas Chatterton statue in 1967.[51] This memorial monument had been erected in 1840 following a public appeal but had already been moved twice before Cartwright decided that it must come down; it was then lost for several years, and today there is instead a bronze of the poet in Millennium Square.[52] Chatterton himself believed that his poetry, not the moment of his death, would be his lasting monument and this is one reason why he commemorates Narva and Mored in song. Although their society and culture are on the verge of annihilation, Chatterton resurrects them – much as Thomas Gray does in his recovery of ancient Welsh culture in his poem 'The Bard' (1757). But what is being restored is not so much the memory of Narva and Mored – which was of course only ever imagined by the poet – but the act of desecration and extermination by the slavers. Chatterton is forcing his readers to confront the horrors of slavery, source of much of Bristol's wealth and, did he but know it, his own schooling – Edward Colston's slaving interests only coming to light in 1920. Chatterton's own statue came down because his death had been misrepresented for nearly two centuries; Colston's was chucked into the harbour two years ago, fished out, and is currently lying in M Shed – as, the museum's website puts it, 'the start of a conversation'.[53] The recent Bristol History Commission Report, *The Colston Statue: What Next?* (2022) recommends that the statue continue to be exhibited, prone and graffitied, and that 'attention is paid to presenting the history in a nuanced, contextualised and engaging way'.[54] History is not static: that is what Chatterton's Rowley corpus repeatedly forces readers to confront, and where his radical mediaevalism merges with his abolitionist 'African Eclogues'.

The last of Chatterton's 'African Eclogues' upon which I will comment is 'The Death of Nicou', which focuses almost entirely on dynastic conflict in Africa.[55] Again the verse weaves through a landscape of unfamiliar places – Cannie, Tiber, Gaigra, Galca – again the scene shimmers with colour: scarlet jasmines, purple aloes. Chatterton imagines the land and sea, which merge together:

> From the blue sea a chain of mountains rise,
> Blended at once with water and with skies:
> Beyond our sight, in vast extension curl'd,
> The check of waves, the guardians of the world. (ll. 43–6)

The poem also records the incarnation of the god Chalma, thereby connecting it with 'Narva and Mored' (and 'An African Song', which has 'Chelmar' [*sic*], l. 34) – Chatterton's African pieces were beginning to be woven into their own tapestry.

'The Death of Nicou' is finely balanced between being a mythological clash between deities, and an episode in political history based around families and friendship, honour and shame, that exposes the complications of African power struggles. An active mythology thus informs the everyday, and gods give birth to humans who continue their contentions. Nicou is the mountain king descended from Narada, the god of war. Narada had battled with Vichon, another deity, eventually defeating him and casting him into a fiery pit, but for this act the gods curse Nicou.[56] Nicou leads the fight against the white slavers with several warriors, including his companion Rorest, driving them back in a tide of their own blood (ll. 83–90). However, Vicat son of Vichon, then

[51] Drury, Feltham-King, & Ozmin (2004: 75); see also Groom (2003: 7, 306).
[52] The bronze was made by Lawrence Holofcener, 2000.
[53] https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/
[54] Burch-Brown & Cole (2022: 17).
[55] Chatterton (2003: 85–8); Chatterton (1971: i. 590–93).
[56] Narada is the messenger of the gods in Hindu tradition, and Vichon is reminiscent of the god Vishnu in Hinduism.

blinds Nicou's sister Nica with poison, and she is abducted by the impetuous Rorest who rapes her. Nica dies, but is avenged by Nicou, who, as if in a Jacobean revenge tragedy, having slain Rorest then kills himself with the same bloody sword.

Once again the white European west is decentred from these particular political matters, and European colonialism is reduced to a dismal sideshow. In addition, Chatterton resolutely resists sentimentalising his subject, but instead sees the shared humanity between Africa and Europe in the most grimly ironic of ways: that African civilisations are both as sophisticated and as vengeful as western European societies. It seems likely that Chatterton would have developed these 'African Eclogues' into an anti-colonial archive comparable to the Rowley works: thick with names and neologisms, places and past histories, creating the impression of depth and intricacy in this new world – a world in which, most importantly, he never once treats his African characters as anything less than complex and passionate and impressive human beings.

4. Environmentalism

Chatterton's richly imagined African vistas are also an aspect of his nature poetry.[57] Chatterton is often thought of as an urban poet: his mediaeval Bristol is a commercial hub, its streets and architectural precincts teeming with busyness and business; his London is a furnace of scurrilous gossip, political plots, and partisan conspiracy. But Chatterton is also a green poet. And he does not simply *describe* the countryside of his imagined 15th century and the lived experience of the 18th century, but infuses his natural scenes with cultural allusions, layering his encounters with nature with further meaning. It is this blend of nature and literature that creates another immersive effect.

Chatterton's trees and flowers and fruit, songbirds and sunshine and showers are never just flora and fauna, never mere meteorology – he evokes earlier literary traditions, and roots them in the environments of his West Country. In the verse 'O! synge untoe mie roundelaie' from 'Ælla', a dead lover is lamented through everyday natural imagery of 'morneynge lyghte' (l. 10), the 'throstles note' (l. 15), 'evenynge cloude' (l. 32), 'baren fleurs' (l. 37), 'brieres' (l. 43), and 'acorne-coppe & thorne' (l. 50), while the repeated refrain turns to the willow:

> Mie love ys dedde,
> Gon to hys death-bedde,
> Al under the wyllowe tree. (ll. 4–6)[58]

Woven into these flowers and ambiances of nature are Shakespeare's Desdemona and Ophelia, yet until the 1790s there are few willow trees in other verse of the period – although there is at least one poem quoting Chatterton's own lines.[59]

So Chatterton's most effective nature verse creates its own culture by including flowers that seldom, if ever, appear in other 18th-century poetry. In 'The Storie of Wyllyam Canynge', for instance, he writes again of 'Oyser Weedes', meaning osier (willow) leaves and Alders of a 'bercie' (birchy) scent (ll. 185–6: alders are in the birch family) – accurately placing these trees alongside a river. In a few lines of the first 'Mynstrelles Songe' in 'Ælla' we encounter the 'ouzle [black

[57] For an informed, if entirely neglected, account, see Scoular (1954: 84–90).
[58] Chatterton (2003: 30–32); Chatterton (1971: i. 210–12).
[59] For more on the nature imagery in this poem, see Groom (2010: 51); for a detailed account of willow poems in the period, see Groom (2010: 52); Chatterton is quoted by Coleridge's friend Joseph Hucks, *Poems* (Cambridge, 1798), 61n.; the allusion is to *Hamlet*, IV. v. 191–6: Shakespeare (1988).

bird]', 'chelandree [goldfinch]', 'larke', 'Pied daisies, kynge-coppes', 'brionie', 'popler' trees, 'oake', and 'ivie' (ll. 221–40).[60] Similarly, in 'An Excelente Balade of Charitie' we have the autumnal sun of September: apples ripening from green to red and pears weighing down boughs – both are the harvest of West Country orchards – as well as the colourful British goldfinch singing:

> The apple rodded[1] from its palie greene,
> And the mole[2] peare did bende the leafy spraie;
> The peede chelandri[3] sunge the livelong daie
> 'Twas nowe the pride, the manhode of the yeare,
> And eke the grounde was dighte[4] in its mose defte[5] aumere.[6] (ll. 3–7)[61]

[1] reddened, ripened. [2] soft. [3] pied goldfinch. [4] drest, arrayed. [5] neat, ornamental.
[6] a loose robe or mantle.

Typical of Chatterton is the 'king-cup', which could refer to various yellow flowering plants such as crowsfoot, butter-flower, butter-cup, gold-cup, and gold-knop ('Songe to Aella', l. 6) – in fact, it is really a literary term used by Spenser, Jonson, and Drayton.[62] The nature poet John Clare later noted that it seemed to be Chatterton's favourite flower, and in the scores of poems written following Chatterton's death he was also often imagined to be a flower himself.[63] Similarly, in the second 'Mynstrelles Songe' there are 'daiseyd mantels' covering the hills and the 'nesh [tender] yonge coweslepe (ll. 278–81). Elsewhere in 'Ælla', autumn apples are described as 'rudde as even skie' (l. 302; alluding to the weatherlore, 'red sky at night'), with 'joicie peres, and berries of blacke die' (l. 304) – the repetition reminds us of the cycle of the seasons.[64] Other less common flowers mentioned by Chatterton include the 'Comfreie Plante' and 'Seyncte Marie' (marigold) in 'Eclogue the First' (ll. 36–7); both had been very popular in 17th-century poetry.[65] Not only is Chatterton's degree of specificity unusual for the time, but his mediaevalism revives earlier flower poetry and in doing so restores the cultural heritage of the landscape.

This appears to have been recognised by later writers. In 'Englysh Metamorphosis', Chatterton writes of the rose, the lily, and the 'mornynge tynge' (l. 49).[66] The 'mornynge tynge' is glossed by Chatterton's editor Donald Taylor as 'morning tongue' or 'morning tinge', suggesting that it is probably the flower morning glory. But there is also an unexpected heft to the phrase. John Keats uses the words 'mourning tongue' – meaning a grieving tongue – in his 4,000-line poem *Endymion*, which includes the 'Song of the Indian Maid':

> 'O Sorrow,
> Why dost borrow
> The mellow ditties from a mourning tongue? –
> To give at evening pale
> Unto the nightingale,
> That thou mayst listen the cold dews among? (ll. 158–63)[67]

[60] See further discussion in Groom (2010: 40).
[61] Chatterton (2003: 62); Chatterton (1971: i. 645); see further discussion in Groom (2010: 46).
[62] See Groom (2010: 52–3).
[63] See Clare (1983: 177–8); Goodridge (1993–4: 137, 139). For Chatterton as a flower, see, for example, Coleridge's 'On Observing a Blossom on the First of February 1796', in which Coleridge refers to Chatterton as 'the wondrous boy' Coleridge (1912: i. 148–9, l. 12).
[64] See further Groom (2010: 46).
[65] For a detailed account of comfrey and marigold poems in the period, see Groom (2010: 49–50).
[66] Chatterton (2003: 36–9); Chatterton (1971: i. 279–82).
[67] Keats (1982: 135–6).

The nightingale mentioned here already had a strong association with Chatterton following Coleridge's conversation poem 'The Nightingale' (1798) – a poem that also includes the king-cup flower – so this is Chatterton country, and the first part of the 'Song of the Indian Maid' is indeed filled with British flowers.[68] But in the preceding stanza Keats has also picked up on Chatterton's actual word, 'tynge' as 'tinge':

> 'O Sorrow,
> Why dost borrow
> The lustrous passion from a falcon-eye? –
> To give the glow-worm light?
> Or, on a moonless night,
> To tinge, on syren shores, the salt sea-spry? (ll. 152–7)[69]

And to whom was this poem dedicated? *Endymion* was 'Inscribed to the memory of Thomas Chatterton': Keats was not simply entranced by the myth of the 'marvellous boy', he was reading Chatterton closely.[70]

What I am suggesting is that Chatterton's flora-rich poetry amounts to a 'green poetics'. One of Chatterton's contemporaries later wrote that the poet suffered from 'such fits of depression of spirits, that [George Catcott, a friend and patron] us'd to walk out ... into the country in hopes of amusing his mind by the Scenery of the Landscapes in the neighbourhood [of Bristol, and of refreshing his exhausted] spirits by the freshness of the air & the agreeable motion of gentle exercise'.[71] The positive benefits of green spaces have been known for centuries, and have more recently been tested in medical research. In 2021, for instance, the Forestry Commission published a report on how woodlands can improve personal health and wellbeing, and medical researchers such as Mathew White have investigated how time spent in green spaces can have real and sustainable benefits for mental and physical health.[72] At a very mundane level, even mud can be good for you. As John Lewis-Stempel has argued, the soil bacterium *Mycobacterium vaccae* has an effect on the release of serotonin in the brain comparable to that of Prozac, which may encourage everything from gardening to walking across a ploughed field to jumping in muddy puddles.[73] Meanwhile in Japan, there is a culture of '*shinrin yoku*' – literally 'forest bathing'. But what is particularly interesting is that research currently being conducted by Alex Smalley, who worked on the BBC Radio 4 project *Forest 404* in conjunction with the universities of Bristol and Exeter, suggests that *virtual* experiences of nature may have very similar health benefits to actual physical (or microbial) experiences.[74]

I have argued elsewhere that we need to consider that the environment is not solely an ecological space but also a cultural space, 'defined as much by literature, history, heritage, and folklore, often at a very local and distinctive level, as it is by ecology, environmental and biological science, and meteorology'.[75] On the other hand, it should be possible to gain health and wellbeing benefits from

[68] Wordsworth & Coleridge (2013: 29–31 (1798 edn), 153–5 (1802 edn)).
[69] Keats (1982: 135).
[70] Keats (1982: 53).
[71] Groom (2015: 9–10).
[72] See Valatin *et al.* (2021); White *et al.* (2013); Holland *et al.* (2021).
[73] Lewis-Stempel (2016: 84).
[74] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4bVgnymDXrY1zpGq3fzNGW8/why-we-should-listen-to-trees ; see Smalley *et al.* (2022).
[75] Groom (2014: 44).

cultural representations of nature – paintings on the wall, nature programmes on the screen – but could nature poetry have a similar effect, even if it is simply as a belief or a learnt response or a memory?[76] Furthermore, there is considerable interest today in bibliotherapy: reading and writing, like spending time in green spaces, can have therapeutic qualities. But in the case of Chatterton, I would like to take this two steps further. First, Chatterton's nature writing is very detailed and also highly idiosyncratic in the sorts of plants he chooses to write about – almost as if his writing is a deliberate, self-administered treatment (like his self-medication with pharmaceutical drugs and painkillers). Since he knew about the positive benefits of walking in the countryside, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he might try to replicate salient aspects of nature in his writing. His mediaevalist and African writings are therefore bursting with flora; these writings require the reader actively to work to unearth meaning; the reader's effort is then rewarded with a natural image – an evocation of green space. The earlier poet James Thomson had already described his own nature poetry as like taking a walk on a summer's day, and so the potential benefits of an absorbing literary experience were already accepted. Over the past two years of lockdowns we have all been encouraged to exercise and spend time outdoors, but what if one is unable to do so for reasons of health, mobility, or location? The mental exertion required to read any poetry has already been researched by an interdisciplinary team at the University of Exeter; but Chatterton's nature poetry may, I suggest, combine this with green benefits.[77]

In conclusion, I will return to Chatterton's life. Chatterton died before he was eighteen years of age – he was a teenager, and although the term was not invented until 1921 it is nevertheless worth considering how his writing might cast light on problems that young people face today, and even help them. Without wanting to reduce the scattered facts we know of Chatterton's life and habits – still less his poetry – to a list of symptoms or mental health issues, it is certainly noticeable that he spent much time alone, lived vicariously through his imagination, was a profoundly driven workaholic, believed his creativity could be poisoned by eating meat or drinking alcohol, and was unafraid to take artistic risks: he was an outsider who created worlds around himself. He also cared for his mother and sister, and regularly wrote and sent presents when he was in London. One of the key mental health issues of the pandemic has been loneliness, especially in children and young people: as the UK charity the Mental Health Foundation puts it,

> Restrictions put in place by Governments to contain the spread of COVID–19 have caused extended periods of physical isolation for children and young people away from their friends, teachers, extended families and community networks.
>
> ...
>
> Early in the pandemic, when young people were asked in March 2020 what their top concerns were about coping over the next few months, their top concern was isolation and loneliness.
>
> - As the first lockdown was progressing in April/May 2020, 35% of young people said they feel lonely often or most of the time despite spending three hours on social media.
> - In late November 2020, according to a survey of UK adults which took place nine months into COVID–19 restrictions, almost half of 18- to 24-year olds reported being lonely during lockdown.

[76] Felstiner (2009).
[77] Zeman *et al.* (2013).

- In a YouGov poll responded to around the same time, 69% of adolescents aged 13–19 said they felt alone ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ in the last fortnight and 59% feel they have no one to talk to ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’.[78]

These problems remain with us, and will influence mental health and wellbeing for years to come.

No-one would dare to suggest that teenagers feeling lonely just need to read a few lines of Chatterton: such a remark is patronising and risible, as life for many in the 21st century is quite different to that in the 1760s, with social media playing a pivotal role in potentially both relieving but also exacerbating feelings of loneliness, while digital media is able to create stupefyingly hyper-real and immersive environments. But it is striking how much of the advice recommended by the Mental Health Foundation to combat loneliness is reflected in Chatterton’s life and work, and it often helps to be shown examples rather than bare and objective action points:

1. as a writer, Chatterton was connected to the world, in fact, to several worlds;
2. he took control of his life;
3. he clearly embraced his creativity;
4. he acknowledged his family;
5. he took time to write to his friends and was fondly remembered in Bristol; and
6. he was also happy to treat himself with his favourite cake: gingerbread.[79]

Chatterton, then, perhaps presents us with an opportunity to think about literature in affirming ways. But we also need to think about Chatterton very differently: not as an unread, suicidal fraudster, but as a positive resource. I’m not suggesting that he is a saintly role model, or that his writing is consistently brilliant – or even consistent. But much of his work is exceptional, experimental, and exhilarating, and he consistently met with – and overcame – adversity. And yet in the end it was a chance accident that killed him – one cannot control everything, and to combat loneliness and despair we should take comfort in knowing that some things are beyond our control and consequently simply not our fault. As such, the life and death, as well as the uncanny poetry of Thomas Chatterton, may offer some consolation today.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Fellows and staff of the British Academy, Andrew Kelly and Bristol Ideas, the Lyra Poetry Festival, the University of Bristol English Department, the University of Exeter English Department, the University of Macau English Department, Professor Ronald Hutton, Professor John Goodridge, and Jonathon Green. This article is dedicated to the memory of Professor Roger Lonsdale.

[78] See https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/public-engagement/unlock-loneliness/loneliness-young-people-research-briefing

[79] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/public-engagement/unlock-loneliness/15-things-do-if-youre-feeling-lonely. It is worth noting that around 2015 the Church of St Mary Redcliffe ran a youth club under the name of ‘Chatterton’s Mob’: Drury *et al.* (2004: 272).

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To cite the article: Groom, N. (2022), 'Thomas Chatterton: four ways of literary terra-forming', *Journal of the British Academy*, 10: 135–155. https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010.135

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

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