

W. H. (William Henry) Ireland:

An Inventory of His Fabricated Shakespearian Manuscripts at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Ireland, W. H. (William Henry), 1775-1835
Title:	W. H. (William Henry) Ireland Fabricated Shakespearian Manuscripts
Dates:	1805
Extent:	1 bound volume in custom case (1.42 linear feet)
Abstract:	An album of Ireland's Shakespeare forgeries and related documents, including drawings, family papers, and Ireland's autograph annotations with references to his <i>Confessions</i> .
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-05036
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials.
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Administrative Information

Preferred Citation: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. W. H. (William Henry) Ireland Fabricated Shakespearian Manuscripts, 1805 (Manuscript Collection MS-05036).

Acquisition: Purchase, 1982 (R 9836).

Processed by: Joan Sibley and Paul Sullivan, 2024

Repository: [Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin](#)

Biographical Sketch

William Henry Ireland was born in 1775 in London, son of Samuel Ireland, a printer, engraver, and writer, and his housekeeper, Anna Maria de Burgh Coppinger, also a writer, alias Mrs. Freeman.

The family were avid admirers of Shakespeare, and at the age of nineteen, William Henry, whom his father regarded as stupid, "found" supposed Shakespeare autograph documents, including a letter to Anne Hathaway, a note from Queen Elizabeth, manuscript pages of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, and a complete "lost" play, *Vortigern and Rowena*. Ireland's father eagerly accepted these as genuine, exhibited them to the public, and published facsimiles in 1795.

Some prominent enthusiasts were fooled, but the forgeries were soon discovered. In 1796 Edmund Malone published a detailed exposé, days before Richard Brinsley Sheridan staged a production of *Vortigern*. The performance was a disaster. The young Ireland immediately published a confession for the forgeries, exonerating his father.

For the rest of his life, Ireland used the scandal and his notoriety to supplement his income as a writer of romances, ballads, histories, and biographies. These include a life of Napoleon, a "memoir" of Joan of Arc, and effusions by the court poet of Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1805 Ireland published his *Confessions*, with detailed descriptions of his motives, techniques, and mistakes as a forger. He soon began fabricating and selling bound albums containing pieces of his "original" forgeries and later fakes, printed facsimiles and editions of the documents, and autograph references to relevant passages in his *Confessions*. These albums have a self-promoting theme, collecting scraps of family correspondence, prints and drawings, family armorial bearings, and writings by his parents, some embellished by hand with ornamental borders. Ireland spent time in debtors' prison (1811), and most of a decade (1814-23) in France, writing about French history. He died in London, April 17, 1835

Sources:

Baines, Paul. "Ireland, William Henry," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <https://www.oxforddnb.com> (2011; accessed 20 November 2024).

Ireland, Samuel. *Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments Under the Hand and Seal of William Shakespeare*. London: Egerton and others, 1795/1796.

Ireland, William Henry. *An Authentic Account of the Shaksperian Manuscripts*. London: J. Debrett, 1796.

Ireland, William Henry. *The Confessions of William Henry Ireland*. London: Thomas Goddard, 1805.

Lynch, Jack. "William Henry Ireland's Authentic Forgeries," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* LXVI.1, Autumn 2004.

Malone, Edmund. *An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Instruments*. London: printed by H. Baldwin, for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1796.

Scope and Contents

A single folio volume contains mounted and bound-in documents, starting with several of William Henry Ireland's "original" forgeries of Shakespeare's signature, letters and verses to Anne Hathaway and others, and signatures and business papers of his associates. Some are accompanied with printed versions of the manuscript materials, and with Ireland's autograph notes making references to relevant pages in his *Confessions*. Ireland includes printed pages from his "discovered" versions of *King Lear*, *Hamlet* (*Hamblette*) and *Vortigern*, and miscellaneous writings, prints, and drawings of his family. A complete copy of his mother's printed ballad, "The Doctor Dissected," concludes the volume.

Related Material

Folger Shakespeare Library (Washington, D.C.). More than one hundred [Ireland manuscript items](#), including the following which resemble the Ransom Center's volume:

- Manuscript S.b.159. [Shaksperian fabrications of William Henry Ireland, containing nine examples of his forgeries. 1796.](#)
- Manuscript S.b.118. [Forgeries by William Henry Ireland of Shakespeare documents.1805.](#)
- Manuscript M.a.250. [Forgeries and other manuscripts of William Henry Ireland.](#)
- Manuscript S.b.157. [Forgeries by William Henry Ireland of documents pretended to be in Shakespeare's hand.](#)
- Manuscript W.b.497. [Dismembered and extra-illustrated copy of Miscellaneous papers and legal instruments ... of William Shakespeare.](#)

Indiana University. Lilly Library (Bloomington, IN): Manuscript LMC 1542. [Ireland mss., 1777-1835.](#)

Princeton University Library (Princeton, N. J.): Manuscript RTC01 (no. 215). [Shakespeare papers, 1813](#)

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography's* biography of Ireland refers the reader to other manuscript materials in The British Library, The Bodleian Library, and the University of Edinburgh Library, among others.

See also [The Online Books Page](#) for links to complete texts of books by William Henry Ireland.

Selected Search Terms

Subjects

Coppinger, Anna Maria de Burgh, d.1802.

Forgers--Great Britain.

Ireland, Samuel, d.1800.

Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Forgeries.

W. H. Ireland's Fabricated Shakesperian [sic] Manuscripts, 141 leaves bound, 1805. Includes 10 forged Shakespearian documents, examples of 7 other Shakespearian forgeries, 12 forged Elizabethan signatures and 5 tracings of authentic ones, 3 drawings, several manuscripts (including drawings) by other members of the Ireland family, and 172 pages from contemporary published transcripts and accounts of the forgeries; all extensively annotated in Ireland's normal hand. Mounted on pages, often with cut-out printed decorative borders; title and preface decorated with cut-out illuminations. Compiled by Ireland for presentation to the Prince of Wales. Title from title page. Bookplate of John Michael Williams. Note on front flyleaf: "Mrss Irelands selected Papers which was mortgaged with M. John Overbury in 1820 for £100."

Title page, folio 1

Contents, folio 2

Prefatory lines, signed by W. H. Ireland, folios 3-4

Signatures and jug watermark, folio 5:

Tracings of four authentic Shakespeare signatures, folio 6

Three forged Shakespeare signatures, folio 6

Jug watermark, drawing, folio 7

Signatures to leading documents and the Quintin seal, folio 8:

Drawing of the Quintin seal, folio 9

Epistolary fabrications, folio 10:

Letter to Richard Cowley, folio 11

Witty conundrum, drawing, folio 12

Hemynge receipt, printed text, folio 13

Letter to Anna Hathaway, printed transcript, folio 13v

Letter to Anna Hathaway, forged autograph, folio 14

Letter to Earl of Southampton, forged autograph, folio 15v

Letter to Earl of Southampton, printed transcript, folio 16

Verses to Anna Hathaway, printed transcript, folio 16v

Verses to Anna Hathaway, forged autograph, folio 17

Tracing of signature of Elizabeth I, folio 18

Forged signature of Elizabeth I, folio 18

Extracts from miscellaneous papers, printed, folio 19

Elizabeth's letter to Sh., with his note, printed, folio 19v

Shakespeare's note to Elizabeth's letter, manuscript, folio 20

Southampton's forged signature, folio 21

Profession of faith, folio 22:

Forged Shakespeare manuscript, folios 23v-24

Printed transcript, folios 25-26

Southampton to Shakespeare, printed transcript, folio 25v

Shakespeare to Cowley, printed transcript, folio 26v

Receipts for playing before Lord Leicester and promissory note to J. Heminges, folio 27:

Two memoranda for playing before Leicester, folios 28-29

Henry Condell's signature, folio 30v

Agreement with Henry Condelle, printed transcript, folios 31-31v

John Lowin's signature, folio 32v

Agreement with John Lowine, printed transcript, folios 33-33v

Michael Fraser's signature, folio 34v

Lease to Michael Fraser, printed transcript, folios 35-36

Shakespeare's signature on deed to Heminges, folio 37

Deed of trust to John Hemyngge, printed transcript, folios 36v, 38-40

Shakespeare's signature on deed to Ireland, folio 41v

Deed of gift to Ireland, printed transcript, folios 42-43

Tributory lines to Ireland, printed transcript, folio 43v

Tributory lines to Ireland, forged Shakespeare autograph, folio 44

Tributory lines to Ireland, variant printed transcript, folio 45

Promissory note to John Heminges, folio 46

Tracing of signature of John Heminges, folio 47

Forged signature of John Heminges, folio 47

King Lear and Vortigern, folio 48:

Miscellaneous papers... of Wm. Shakespeare... in the possession of Samuel Ireland, 1796, printed title and preface, folios 49-57

King Lear:

Last page, printed, folio 58

Introductory leaf, printed, folio 58v

Introductory leaf, forged manuscript, folio 59

Kente speech, forged manuscript, folio 60

Complete printed text of play, folios 61-108v

Hamlette, seven pages of printed text, folios 109-112

Vortigern, Samuel Ireland's handbill, printed, folio 113

Lines on Sir Thos. More's Jester, folios 114:

Ten lines, manuscript, folio, 115

Family of Sir Thomas More, lithograph print, folio 115

Specimens of Acrostics, folio 116:

Acrostic on Mary of Scotland, manuscript, folio 117

Acrostic on Sir Philip Sidney, manuscript, folio 118

Acrostic on Henry Prince of Wales, manuscript, folio 118

Shaksperian [sic] Library or Note on the Rare Tract concerning Gunpowder Conspirators, folio 119:

Four lines referring to execution of traitors, manuscript, folio 120

Woodcut of conspirators, folio 120

Miscellaneous documents relating to Ireland Family, folio 121:

Samuel Ireland, bookplate, folio 122

Jane Ireland, handwritten letter to W. H. Ireland, 20 April 1803, folio 123

Samuel Ireland, handwritten notes on his Picturesque Tour, folio 124

Samuel Ireland, Picturesque Tour, title page, printed, 1790, folio 124

Samuel Ireland, Drawing of Mrs. Rudd at Perreau Trial, 1775?, folio 125

Samuel Ireland, engraving after his drawing of his daughter Anna Maria playing the piano, folio 126

W. H. Ireland's mother, handwritten letter and poetry, folio 127

James Caulfield, handwritten letter, folio 128

W. H. Ireland's mother, portrait traced from original, folio 129v

W. H. Ireland's mother, The Doctor Dissected, printed ballad, 177a, folios 130-141