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The Poetry Wars

By AMANDA FOREMAN

Never at a loss for words, Oscar Wilde suffered few qualms over how he obtained them: "Of course I plagiarize," he admitted. "It is the privilege of the appreciative man." If Wilde were alive today, his sexuality wouldn't merit a glance—whereas the slightest whisper of plagiarism would probably be sufficient to send him off to France, or wherever disgraced writers are exiled nowadays.



At least this time, Wilde wouldn't find himself alone. It has been a vintage year for poetry scandals. The tightknit world of verse has seen four prizewinning poets accused of plagiarism. In the latest instance, the judges of the prestigious Forward Prize announced the short list in September, only to have one of the front-runners exposed as a serial "lifter." The case was perplexing. The poem in contention was acknowledged to be original, but did the

author's past transgressions render it ineligible? The accused answered the question by withdrawing from the competition. Before readers rush to the barricades in outrage, however, it should be borne in mind that there is a reason why poetry and plagiarism run trippingly off the tongue.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Martial perfected the art of the witty epigram. As his fame and income grew, so did the number of imitators, leading him to coin the term *plagiarus*, literally "the kidnapper of slaves." "If you wish them to be called yours, pray buy them, that they may be mine no longer," he raged.

Martial's plea to respect his copyright meant little during the Dark Ages, when writing came to mean laboriously preserving ancient texts for the next generation. By the time printing was commonplace, sensibilities were still different from Martial's: People didn't complain about the evidence of plagiarism in Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" or Shakespeare's plays, though both freely borrowed and imitated their way into immortality.

The honor accorded to originality began to spread in Europe as the Enlightenment took hold. The 17th-century playwright Ben Jonson anglicized Martial's *plagiarus* to "plagiary" in his own epigram against literary theft: "To Prowl the Plagiary." Later critics praised Jonson for establishing the modern meaning of plagiarism while also lambasting him for plagiarizing Martial. In the 18th century, detecting plagiarism became a sort of parlor game. Suddenly anyone with a classical education could be a literary sleuth and tear down the reputations of giants. Indeed, Isaac Newton's famously self-deprecating remark about "standing on the shoulders of giants" wasn't his own; it

is a variation on a line from the poet George Herbert's book of proverbs.

All the fun was taken out of the game when schoolmaster William Lauder caused a sensation in 1747 with his made-up "proof" that John Milton had plagiarized "Paradise Lost." Exposed, Lauder lived out the rest of his days in Barbados. Over the next centuries, poets continued with unfailing regularity to accuse one another of plagiarism and to be accused. Among them: Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, De Quincey, Tennyson, Longfellow, Poe, Wilde and Eliot. So many; and this without even touching on the poets who used the phrase "blood, sweat and tears" in various iterations.

The rows of the past should offer some comfort to the benighted poetry community of today. It isn't that standards are slipping, it's just that detection is a mere click away.