INTRODUCTION

SOMETIMES in the fourth century B.C., Heraclides of Pontus quarreled with another philosopher, Dionysius “the Renegade.” Heraclides was a dignified, respectable, and corpulent gentleman; a student of Plato and an expert on natural philosophy, he was known by the nickname ho pompikos, “the stately one” (a pun on his real title, ho pontikos, “the one from Pontus”). Dionysius was more disreputable. Beginning as a Stoic who denied the existence of pain and pleasure, he developed an acute eye inflammation which convinced him that his principles were in error. He left his old school (hence his nickname) and spent the rest of his life—apparently a long and happy one—as a Cyrenaic, haunting bars and brothels.

Dionysius forged a tragedy, the Parthenopaeus, and ascribed it to Sophocles. Heraclides, who had done some forgery of his own and should have known better, duly quoted it as genuine. And Dionysius in turn proclaimed his own authorship of the work. When Heraclides insisted that it must be genuine, Dionysius pointed out that the supposed tragedy was an acrostic: the first letters of the lines spelled out the true message (in this case, the name of Dionysius’ boyfriend, Pankalos). Heraclides replied that the appearance of the name could be accidental. Instructed to read on, he found that the acrostic continued with a coherent couplet:
INTRODUCTION

An old monkey isn’t caught by a trap.
Oh yes, he’s caught at last, but it takes time.

Further initial letters spelled out a final, crushing verdict: “Heraclides is ignorant of letters.” When Heraclides had read this, we are told, he blushed.¹

In 1950, Paul Coleman-Norton of Princeton University published a new Greek fragment drawn from a set of homilies on the Gospel according to Matthew. An Oxford-trained expert on the fathers of the church, he had done original work in the 1920s on questions of authenticity and textual transmission. He said he had found his new text tucked into an Arabic manuscript in a mosque in Morocco, which he had visited during World War II in the course of Operation Torch; though the exigencies of wartime service and later friction between American soldiers and the native inhabitants of the town had prevented him from obtaining a photograph of his manuscript, he had transcribed the relevant section. This he printed in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly with an apparatus and extensive linguistic commentary. The text continues the passage in Matthew 24 where Jesus tells his disciples that those who are assigned the portion of the hypocrites will be condemned to “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In the new section a disciple raises an objection: what, he asks, will happen to the toothless? “O ye of little faith,” Jesus replies, “teeth will be provided.”²

Coleman-Norton never publicly claimed authorship of his text, though he suggested its comic character at numerous points in his spoof commentary, as when he offered a parallel from Lewis Copeland’s The World’s Best Jokes (1941) and remarked that the disciple who
asked the question was dumb “in the Pennsylvania German sense.” But he did know that students who had heard him make the same joke in his courses would recognize that he—like Dionysius the Renegade—had invented, not discovered, his apparently ancient text. The modern professional scholar and the ancient barroom philosopher shared aspirations with regard to their earliest readers (whom they hoped to fool) and to the past (which they tried to recreate by a combination of technical skill and vivid imagination).

These curious cases enclose like wobbly bookends a far longer than five-foot shelf of forgeries, one which stretches, as the dates of the forgeries suggest, from the beginnings of Western civilization to the present. For 2,500 years and more, forgery has amused its uninvolved observers, enraged its humiliated victims, flourished as a literary genre and, most oddly of all, stimulated vital innovations in the technical methods of scholars. Forgery has been widespread in time and place and varied in its goals and methods, and it can easily be confused with superficially similar activities. At one extremity, as in the two cases we began with, it borders on mystification, the production of literary works meant to deceive for a short time only, as practical jokes. At the other, it borders on normal fiction. Forgery does not include all works wrongly attributed to authors, since in antiquity and the Middle Ages, and even to some extent in modern times, works have been misattributed for many reasons, some quite innocent. It does not even include all works that authors have deliberately ascribed to persons other than themselves. In some periods and traditions writers have ascribed religious texts to divine or semidivine figures
not because they were preoccupied with matters of authorship but because they wished to stress the continuity of their writings with an original tradition or an orthodox doctrine. A number of Jewish writers did this in the last centuries B.C. when they wrote apocalyptic and other works under the names of the biblical patriarchs, perhaps to fill the gap left by the cessation of prophecy. Such practices need not imply an intention to deceive, though they sometimes do; their products should be called pseudepigrapha rather than forgeries until the mens rea of the author is established. In more modern times, of course, pen names have concealed a variety of sins and authors—and sometimes, as in the case of the mass of pamphlets dubiously ascribed to Defoe by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, they have confused a multitude of librarians and readers.

Subtracting all the pseudepigrapha not produced by forgery, however, we still confront a variegated mass of texts. Forgers have produced thousands of documents that deceived the readers for whom they were intended. Forgeries have often played a central role in religious, political, and literary history. And forgery has stimulated, both in the forgers who tried to create convincing documents and in the critics who tried to unmask them, the development of a richer sense of what the past was really like. Forger and critic have been entangled through time like Laocoon and his serpents; the changing nature of their continuous struggle forms a central theme in the development of historical and philological scholarship.

In this essay I will try to capture and display some of the splendid, evanescent triumphs of learning and style that Western forgers and critics have produced. Limits
naturally have to be set on the field to be covered. I will consider, in the first place, only serious forgeries that include textual matter. Ordinary forgeries done without skill—like the Hitler diaries crudely assembled by Konrad Kujau, or the 27,345 letters by Caesar, Cleopatra, Vercingetorix, Alcuin, Alexander the Great, and Attila, among others, all written in imitation old French by Vrain-Lucas for a single client, the compliant mathematician Michel Chasles—will make no appearance here. Forged works of art that include no written matter will receive no attention, forged legal documents not much. And the rich crops of literary deceit sown, irrigated, and brought to ripeness by rabbis, imams, and Chinese literati will necessarily evade the sickle of a harvester whose training is all Western. These limitations, on the other hand, will make it possible to treat a big subject in a small compass. My chief aim is to suggest by offering a combination of overview and case studies the extent, the coherence, and the historical interest of two complex, central, tightly intertwined strands in the Western tradition.