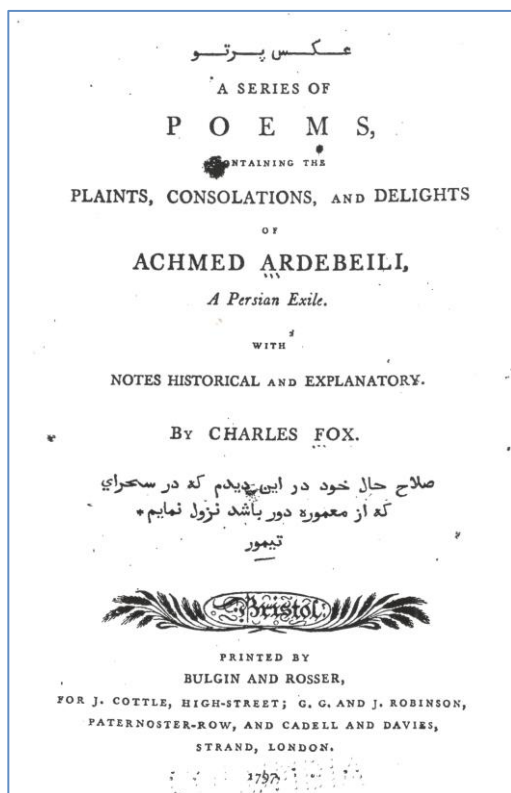


Orientalism Bristol Fashion: Charles Fox and Achmed Ardebeili, the Persian Romantic.¹

Paul Cheshire

WHEN SELLING HIS PUBLISHING BUSINESS TO LONGMANS in 1799, Joseph Cottle described in his *Early Recollections* that he was pleased to be able to recover and return to their authors the copyright of two of his less commercially successful publications.² One was *Lyrical Ballads* by two promising young anonymous poets, the other was *A Series of Poems, Containing the Complaints, Consolations, and Delights of Achmed Ardebeili, A Persian Exile. With Notes Historical and Explanatory* (Bristol: Cottle, 1797) by his 'personal friend' Charles Fox.



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Fox's *Achmed* poems appeared at a formative time for English Romanticism, and apart from any value the book has in itself, the list of subscribers provided in its opening pages serves as a who's who to that West Country circle. These include Coleridge, Southey, George Burnett, Thomas Poole, William Gilbert,

¹ I am greatly indebted to Kitty Scoular Datta for her work on Fox: 'Publishing and Translating Hafez Under Empire', in *Books Without Borders*, Vol II, eds R. Fraser and M. Hammond (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 58–70, (cited as 'Hafez' hereafter); 'Before the Deluge', *TLS*, 20 Aug 2004, 13–14, (cited as 'Deluge' hereafter). Datta responded generously to my enquiries and provided me with a chapter 'West Country Orientalism' (WCO hereafter) from her unpublished study *A Map of Manuscripts: Oriental Book-collection: Languages, Localities and Arts of the Book 1730–1835*.

² Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols (London, 1837), II: 26.

Ann Yearsley, Thomas Beddoes, Edward Long Fox, John Prior Estlin, Azariah Pinney, Nathaniel Biggs, and many other names familiar to those who have studied the circle in any depth. Although Wordsworth is not listed as a subscriber, Coleridge gave him a complimentary copy on Cottle's behalf when he visited him at Racedown in June 1797 (CL, I: 325). This was part of Wordsworth's introduction to the circle that he was about to join, following his move to Alfoxden.

Robert Southey rated Fox highly as an artist. He tried to get him to illustrate his *Letters from Spain and Portugal*, but Fox was 'often sick and always slow' and never finished the work.³ As a sign of Southey's attachment, when in London studying for the law in 1797 he asked Cottle to send him portraits of Fox and his wife, saying he longed to see the Foxes, their dog, and their parrot (RSL, 17 Feb 1797). He was later to recall the parrot in particular: 'I have profiles of [Fox], his wife, and the parrot which used to take its place upon the tea board, make free with the sugar, and call him father'.⁴

Fox was about twenty years older than the Romantics who came into contact with him in the late 1790s, and Southey's description of Fox's quirky menagerie is corroborated by several affectionate memoirs by younger people with a literary bent whom Fox befriended. Some of these became inspired to study oriental languages as a result of seeing Fox's collection of Persian manuscripts while visiting his home (Datta, WCO). Fox was a significant presence in 1790s Bristol: his *Achmed Ardebeili* poems and his knowledge of Islamic culture were important contributions at a formative time in the lives of the three first generation English Romantic poets.

Charles Fox

Charles Fox was born in Falmouth, Cornwall, to a Quaker family in 1748.⁵ His eulogist, J. P., writes that Fox studied anatomy and medicine while young.⁶ A genealogy of the confusingly numerous members of the Cornish Fox family describes him as a Falmouth chemist.⁷ According to Fox's obituary published in the *Monthly Magazine*, he had been a Falmouth bookseller.⁸ These differing accounts might at a stretch be harmonised: many bookshops sold medicines at this time, and he may have applied his medical knowledge in that setting.⁹

Around the year 1780 Fox's house-cum-shop in Falmouth caught fire, and his unusual reaction became the subject of anecdotes. In the version told by

³ Robert Southey, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, gen eds. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford, Ian Packer. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/> letter of 15 Jul 1798 [accessed 11 July 2018]. Hereafter cited in text (RSL + date).

⁴ *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles*, ed. Edward Dowden (London, 1881), 281.

⁵ England & Wales, Quaker Birth, Marriage, and Death Registers: Quarterly Meeting of Cornwall: Births (1609–1781) (Ancestry.com). 'Charles Son of John Fox Jun. & Rebecca his wife was born at ffalm[outh] 2nd mth: 1 March 1748'. This date of birth agrees with a report that Charles Fox died in his 61st year (*Bristol Mirror*, 11 Mar 1809). ODNB's alternative date – a Charles Fox born in 1740 son of Joseph Fox a Falmouth grocer – does not fit this age.

⁶ J. P., 'A Funeral Eulogium on Mr Charles Fox, late of Bristol', *Bristol Mirror*, 25 Mar 1809. (J.P. hereafter).

⁷ [Joseph Foster], *A Revised Genealogical Account of the Various Families Descended from Francis Fox, of St. Germans, Cornwall* (London, 1872), 15.

⁸ *Monthly Magazine* 27: (1809), 311–2. (MM Obit hereafter).

⁹ Basil Cottle, *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2008), 19.

Richard Polwhele, once Fox realised the house was beyond saving, he climbed the roof of the house opposite and calmly started making a sketch of the conflagration. The poet John Wolcot (a.k.a. 'Peter Pindar'), who was present, took more practical action and 'saved the horses in the stable, by muffling up their heads in blankets'.¹⁰

Fox's obituarist writes that, after losing all his stock in the fire, Fox decided to earn his living as an artist. Following the fire there is a seven-year gap in information until 1787, when Fox travelled to the Baltic region to sketch its 'wild and sublime scenery'. (MM Obit, 311). According to the son of Fox's close friend Adam Clarke, the journey was undertaken on health grounds.¹¹

Fox sailed to the Baltic on a ship under the command of his brother; he walked alone through Sweden, Norway, and into Russia where he travelled 'the lakes and forests north of the Neva' near Saint Petersburg (MM Obit, 311).¹² This expedition gave rise to a series of 178 drawings intended to illustrate an account of his travels. These were later bound as a double volume, which was admired by many of Fox's friends (and described in some detail in John Russell Smith's sale catalogue of 1847), before disappearing into unknown hands.¹³ Fox met scholars of Persian poetry during that tour and Datta plausibly suggests that this is where his study of Asiatic languages started (Datta, 'Hafez', 63).

After returning to England, Fox moved to Bristol. His arrival there in the summer of 1788 was noted by the diarist Sarah Champion, who was shortly to marry his uncle (also called Charles Fox):¹⁴

I was gratified with a sight of Chas. Fox Ju^r of whom, having heard so much, I had long wished to see. His person being singular (tall & thin) & a kind of impediment in his speech, did not deprive him of powers in conversation to command attention. He had read & seen much, had a fine taste in drawing, which he now made his profession, & for this purpose was come to settle in Bristol.¹⁵

Fox not only set himself up professionally as an artist, he also quickly acquired a reputation in that city for his knowledge of Oriental literature. He married a Hannah Ferrieres in 1789 and appears in Bristol directories from 1792

¹⁰ Richard Polwhele, *Reminiscences, in Prose and Verse*, 3 vols (London, 1836), II: 182. Wolcot's biographer, Tom Girtin places the fire between 1779 and 1780, when Wolcot was dividing his time between Falmouth and Helston. *Doctor with Two Aunts* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 82.

¹¹ John Russell Smith, *A Catalogue of Choice, Useful, and Curious Books*, Part III (London, 1847), 28, item 489.

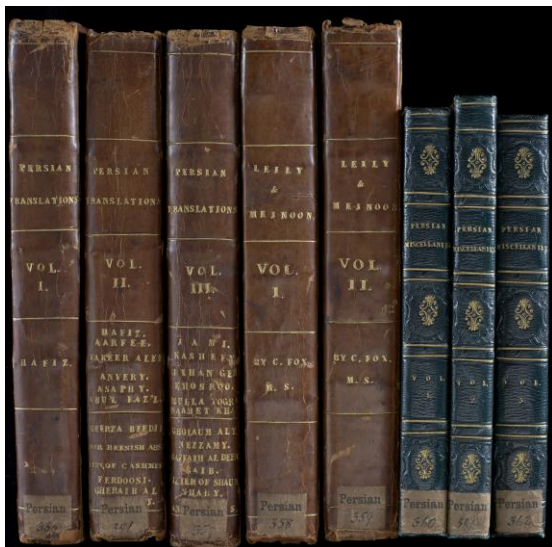
¹² Datta deduces from Fox's statement that he 'conversed in Russia' with Muslims from Astrakhan (*Achmed*, xxvii) that Fox travelled all the way south to Astrakhan and the Caspian Sea, ('Hafez', 63, 'Deluge', 14); this assumption is toned down in WCO. Fox could have met people from Astrakhan, while on his known itinerary in north west Russia.

¹³ The volumes were left to Fox's friend Adam Clarke (see J. B. B. Clarke, *A Historical and Descriptive Catalogue of the European and Asiatic Manuscripts in the Library of the late Dr. Adam Clarke* (London: Murray, 1835), 98).

¹⁴ Foster, *Revised Genealogical Account*, 7 and 15, shows that the elder Charles Fox (who married Sarah Champion) was the younger brother of John Fox, who was the father of our Charles Fox.

¹⁵ *The Diary of Sarah Fox*, ed. Madge Dresser (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 2003), 108 [8 July 1788]. Denoting him 'junior' distinguished him from his uncle of the same name. I am grateful to Jonathan Barry for directing my attention to this passage. (Edward Long Fox – also a Quaker from Falmouth – appears in the diary but is never referred to as a relative).

onwards, first as a ‘miniature painter’, and then, from 1803, with no occupation listed.¹⁶ According to J. P., Fox came into an inheritance which enabled him to devote himself entirely to his translations of Persian poetry, which remain in elegantly bound manuscript at the John Rylands Library.¹⁷



Spines of Fox's works at the John Rylands Library
(Persian MSS 355-62. Copyright of the University of Manchester)

Fox wrote poetry in his youth: ‘the effusions of his early life abound with pathos’ (J. P.), but none of these early poems survive. Richard Polwhele believed Fox to be the author of some anonymous Cornish dialect verses in dialogue (or ‘Cornish Eclogues’) that were circulating locally in manuscript. (For the reliability of this attribution see my appendix at the end).

The impression of settled domesticity given by Fox's Bristol friends needs to be set against evidence of restlessness:

between 1792 and 1807 Fox moved between at least five different Bristol addresses, and one in nearby Bath. Furthermore, all accounts of Fox refer to his chronic (but unspecified) ill-health.¹⁸ As this was given as the cause of his journey to the Baltic in 1787, and of his failure to complete work for Southey in 1797, it was clearly a long-term condition. Fox moved from Bristol back to Bath once again about 1808, where he died in 1809.¹⁹

Achmed Ardebeili

With this brief sense of what kind of a man Fox was, we can return to his major contribution to the early Romantic circle, the *Achmed Ardebeili* poems. These amount to over eighty poems, arranged in a sequence, mostly written in the first-person voice of Achmed. The sequence needs to be read as a whole to appreciate the narrative development from Achmed's courtly luxuries of love and wine, to his hardships of exile in a cave – a former lion's den (68) – in the mountain forest, where he finds spiritual enlightenment.

Fox provides a detailed thirty-page introduction from which we learn that

¹⁶ Marriage: Bristol Record Office, St Augustine the Less, 3 May 1789. Fox's signature on the marriage certificate matches his signature in Joseph Cottle's, 'Bristol Album', Cornell University Library, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Wordsworth Collection #4622 Bd. Ms. 8 ++, f^o 7. Bristol Directories: 1792, *Reed*; 1793–1808 (where extant), *Matthews*.

¹⁷ John Rylands Library, Manchester University: Persian MS 355–59 (5 bound vols) are Fox's translations from Persian into English. Persian MSS 360–62 (3 bound vols) are copies of Persian poems in Fox's hand. (Located by Datta).

¹⁸ Fox's letter to Adam Clarke dated 10 Dec 1802 reveals both chronic illness and an indecisive desire (unfulfilled) to live once again in his 'native country, Falmouth': *An Account of the Infancy, Religious and Literary Life of Adam Clarke*, edited by the Rev. J. B. B. Clarke, 3 vols (London, 1833), II: 56–7.

¹⁹ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 9 Mar 1809

Achmed, a native of Ardibil (a city in the north of Iran) (64), had ‘an unexpected rise to favour, fortune and command’ under the ‘corrupt and sordid’ vizir who ran the kingdom, while Shah Solayman I (1648–1694)²⁰ dedicated himself to ‘sloth, cruelty and lasciviousness’ (v). The virtuous Achmed was intrigued against, disgraced and banished (vi), and he fled to caves in the mountainous, ‘savage haunted forest’ regions of Iran (129). Fox’s introduction also gives a short history of Islam and its division into the Sunni and Shia sects. The respectful tone Fox adopts here stands in contrast to his portrayal of the Shah’s ‘libidinous excess, and almost continual inebriety’ (vii). Fox puts forward a sympathetic view of Islam, which he says he has learned from his ‘intimate acquaintance with a native of Persia’ a Shia ‘of liberal sentiments and extensive information’ (viii).

This verifiable historical setting and cultural background adds authority to the poems that follow, and most readers have readily accepted these as translations or adaptations based on a Persian original. According to an article on the poetry of that period in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, there were over a thousand poets during Shah Solayman’s reign, most of whose names are obscure even to specialists.²¹ The fact that Achmed is a common name, and Ardebeili merely denotes the city of his birth, increases the problem of identification. Paul Kaufman, in his penetrating 1965 study of Fox’s *Achmed*, consulted a Persian specialist, who was not only unable to trace any original Persian poems – he stated categorically that based on the many rules concerning subject matter and addressee ‘many of the poems could never have been written by a Persian’. Kaufman felt left with two alternatives: ‘Either Fox must be accused of bad faith in presenting fabrications [...] or we must assume he elaborated on the original themes’.²² Kaufman was reluctant to accuse Charles Fox of ‘bad faith’ and was content to leave Achmed’s identity as a mystery to be cleared up. In the age of Google and online library catalogues any trace of Achmed should surface, but the only hit (even allowing for variant renderings into the western alphabet) is Achmed Ardebeili (1500–85), a sixteenth-century Shia jurist and theologian, who – besides being a century too early to fit Fox’s Achmed – is not known to have written any poetry. If Fox, in ascribing his own poems to a fictional Persian, is following the Bristol fashion of Chatterton’s fictitious Rowley, must this be seen – in Kaufman’s terms – as an act of ‘bad faith’? Kitty Datta’s awareness of the cultural context allows for a more sophisticated view of this issue. In her study of eighteenth-century translators of the Persian poet Hafez, she announces with no fuss whatsoever that Fox ‘wrote, under the pseudonym of Achmed Ardabili, a set of Persianate

²⁰ Spelt ‘Selyman’ by Fox and ‘Sulaiman’ by some modern scholars. Unless quoting from other sources I have followed the spelling ‘Solayman’ by Rudi Matthee in *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London: Tauris, 2012), 55–74.

²¹ Z. Safa, ‘Persian Literature in the Safavid Period’, 948–964; Ehsan Yarshater, ‘Persian Poetry in the Timurid and Safavid period’, 965–94, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed Jackson, Lockhart and Johnson, Vol VI. Yarshater writes that ‘Muhammad Tahir Nasrabadi, the 11th/17th-century anthologist and biographer of poets, writing under the Safavid Shah Sulaiman (1666–94), records nearly 1,000 contemporary poets’ (980).

²² Paul Kaufman, ‘Charles Fox: an Early Interpreter of Persian Poetry’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 2: 1 (1965), 79–86, 83.

lyric poems, besides doing extensive Hafez translations of his own' (Datta, 'Hafez', 63).

Datta's study brings William Jones' *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (Oxford, 1772) into the frame. Jones writes in his preface of the reader's expectation that he should

prove the authenticity of those *Eastern* originals, from which I profess to have translated them: indeed, so many productions, invented in *France*, have been offered to the publick as genuine translations from the languages of *Asia*, that I should have wished, for my own sake, to clear my publication from the slightest suspicion of imposture; but there is a circumstance peculiarly hard in the present case; namely that were I to produce the *originals* themselves, it would be impossible to persuade some men, that even *they* were not forged for the purpose, like the pretended language of *Formosa* (i–ii).²³

This preface illustrates the power of the Orientalist over the non-specialist. Edward Said may have put forward the power politics of 'Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient',²⁴ but Said's epigraph – 'The East is a Career' – added a hint that the Orientalist can also take advantage of his or her expertise to wield power over fellow Westerners. Jones seems to be enjoying his power over the non-expert readers who have no way of knowing what is genuine and what is imitation. He then goes on in the first of his 'Asiatick' poems to offer an imitation poem along similar lines to Fox's *Achmed*. Jones explains in his preface that he has taken 'figures, sentiments, and descriptions [...] from the poets of Arabia [...] and connected them in such a manner as to form one continued piece' (viii). This poem is called 'Solima, an Arabian Eclogue'. Given that Fox's *Achmed* addresses all eleven of his love poems to Selima (the same name with variant transliteration), Fox's choice of name might even be a hint to the knowledgeable that he is following Jones' pattern.

If so, this was not spotted by reviewers: most of Fox's contemporaries believed the *Achmed* poems to be translations. Of the four reviews in periodicals only the *Critical Review* cottoned on: 'We strongly suspect the fancy's coinage in this affair, and that he is bona fide, the offspring of a Bristol brain, instead of a province of Persia.'²⁵ Note that important 'bona fide'. This reviewer sounds like an insider. *The Analytical Review* and *The Monthly Review* believed Fox to have translated the poems from *Achmed*'s Persian originals.²⁶ *The British Critic* accepted that Fox's *Achmed* was the 'original author' but complained that Fox had not provided enough information about him.²⁷

²³ Michael J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones: Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746–1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 74–5, gives the background to Jones' unwarranted accusations of French 'imposture'.

²⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995), 3.

²⁵ *Critical Review* 20: (1797) 388–91.

²⁶ *Analytical Review* 26: (1797), 35–41; *Monthly Review* 24: (1797), 83–4.

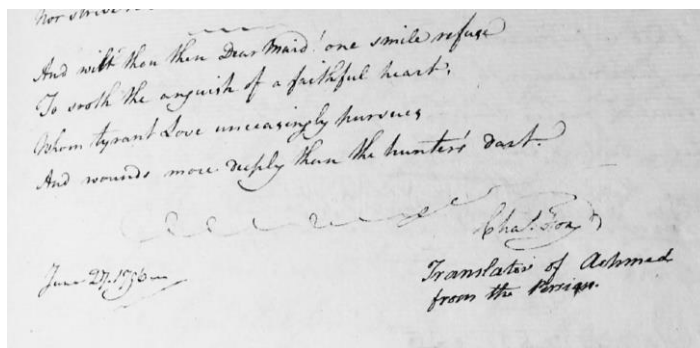
²⁷ *British Critic* 12: (1798), pp. 466–70.

Another insider with knowledge of Persian literature, Adam Clarke, who studied Asiatic languages in the course of his biblical scholarship, wrote that he had learned Persian from Fox, while he was living in Bristol. He mentioned the *Achmed* poems knowingly: 'Though attributed to *Achmed Ardebeili*, there is every reason to believe that the poems sprang from the head and heart of the intelligent and amiable *Charles Fox* himself.'²⁸ Clarke's 'there is every reason to believe' suggests that, in spite of being an intimate friend and fellow scholar, he has not learned this from Fox, but has worked it out for himself. Even so, he makes it clear that he takes nothing amiss: that this is not to be seen as imposture.

Although fictitious, Fox's creation Achmed Ardebeili was convincing enough to have an afterlife as a real Persian poet in anthologies which never mentioned Fox's name. *The Pleasures of Love*, selected by G. W. Fitzwilliam (London, 1806) includes six 'To Selima' poems 'by Achmed Ardebeili, a Persian Exile.' *Classical Selections in Verse* (Liverpool, 1808) includes six poems 'From the Persian of Achmed Ardebeili' alongside poems by Wordsworth, Southey, Burns, and others. The British Library English Short Title Catalogue is not the only modern library that continues to credit the fictional 'Ahmad Ardabili' (so spelled in its modernised transcription) as the author of Fox's *Achmed* poems.

Once alerted to Fox's fabrication, a reader can appreciate how cunningly he has worded his title page: *A Series of Poems, Containing the Complaints, Consolations, and Delights of Achmed Ardebeili, A Persian Exile. With Notes Historical and Explanatory. By Charles Fox*. The full-stop after 'Explanatory' detaches 'By Charles Fox' from the 'Notes' and allows it to apply equally to the 'Series of Poems'; and, with this understanding, the statement that the poems *contain* the 'Plaints, Consolations, and Delights of Achmed Ardebeili' is no more than a description of their *subject-matter*, rather than of their *authorship*.

One might nevertheless expect Fox to have told Joseph Cottle, as publisher of *Achmed*, that its Persian author did not in fact exist. But no: Cottle's ignorance can be seen from a note in his Bristol Album, below, describing Fox as 'Translator of Achmed from the Persian' ('Bristol Album', f^o 7).



Charles Fox, 'To Selima' (detail), with Joseph Cottle's annotation bottom right.
(Cottle, Bristol Album, fo7. Cornell University Library, Wordsworth Collection, #4622 Bd. Ms. 8++)

²⁸ Clarke, Account, I: 45.

The other member of that Bristol circle whose opinion on the Achmed question survives is Robert Southey: his poetical reference to Fox as ‘him | Who sung the banished man of Ardebeil’, could sound like a recognition that Achmed was Fox’s invention, but his explanatory footnote saying the poems are ‘from the Persian’ suggests otherwise. This line appears in a dedicatory verse letter to Amos Cottle that prefaces Amos’s verse translation of the *Edda of Samund*. As the *Edda* was published by Cottle, one might wonder whether Cottle himself had added the footnote without Southey’s participation; but given other footnotes to the same poem are written in Latin and Greek (which was beyond Cottle’s capacity) we can be sure that Southey was given the opportunity to write his own notes.²⁹

This divide between those in the know and those who accepted Achmed continued unacrimoniously to the very end of Fox’s life. The unidentified friend who wrote Fox’s obituary had enough orientalist knowledge to name several Persian poets whom Fox had translated and to recognise the Achmed poems as Fox’s own work (MM Obit, 311). Fox’s eulogist J. P., however, who claimed Fox was a ‘friend’ to whom he felt ‘filial affection’, referred to Fox’s ‘translation of the Poems of Achmed’. Fox’s motivation for gulling even close friends is impossible to fathom. If he *is* the author of the ‘Cornish Eclogues’, these verse dialogues in dialect show the same inclination to adopt a fictitious persona that appears in *Achmed*. Perhaps deceptive impersonation appealed to Fox’s impish sense of humour.

Fox and The Romantics

Once the Achmed poems and his life story are read as Fox’s creations, the message for Fox’s friends becomes clear. Following the war with France and Pitt’s gagging Bills which stifled protest and political activism, Coleridge had gone into rural retreat at Nether Stowey, contemplating in July 1797, after Wordsworth’s arrival at nearby Alfoxden, Nature as

a living Thing
That acts upon the mind, and with such hues
As cloathe the Almighty Spirit, when he makes
Spirits perceive His presence
(Letter to Southey, 17 July 1797, CL, I: 335)

Fox’s tale of Achmed’s flight from the court of a despotic Shah, his settlement in rural isolation, where he finds through nature the same sense of communion with the divine presence that Coleridge was concurrently enjoying in the Quantocks, fits perfectly with the mood of the times. In the late 1790s such a story would appeal to anyone whose distress at the course of the French Revolution, was inducing them to consider a similar retreat from the despotic world of Shah Pitt II. Fox’s language is Coleridgean in places: Achmed’s

²⁹ A. S. Cottle, *Icelandic Poetry, or the Edda of Samund translated into English Verse* (Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1797), xxxvi; xxxv has a Latin footnote, p.xxxix a Greek one.

‘savage haunted forest’ (129) foreshadows ‘Kubla Khan’, and his ‘wondrous whole’ (164), and ‘eternal transcript of the heavenly mind’ (142), echo concepts in Coleridge’s ‘Religious Musings’. At times, Achmed might be rambling up and down the very combs of the Quantocks:

I love to traverse the wild tracts around;
I love the forest glooms, and lonely glades;
The rising rock, the wooded glen profound,
Almost conceal’d in deep embow’ring shades.

And *there*, along the little wandering stream,
At morn, at noon, at eve, I love to stray,
To see its frequent-falling waters gleam
Down the dark steep, caught by some vagrant ray. (137)

There are traces of Fox’s influence on the works of all three of the Romantic poets whom he encountered. His influence on Wordsworth has received most scholarly attention. Duncan Wu has detected ‘phrasing and imagery’ in Achmed’s poem ‘Danger’ that is echoed in Wordsworth’s *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, a poem revised between 1795 and 1799, in which the following lines first appear:³⁰

No tree was there, no meadow’s pleasant green
No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear.³¹

Wu compares these lines to Achmed’s

But ah! no hoarsely-foaming flood is there,
To yield refreshment in this dreary waste, (49)

and also notes that the word ‘cheerless’ is common to both poems.

Datta’s essay ‘Before the Deluge’ sets out the nexus of images from orientalist sources that resemble the enigmatic Arab who appears in the dream of a ‘friend’ in *The Prelude*, Book V (1805 version). Wordsworth’s resulting ‘fancy’, when – influenced by the dream – he imagined a ‘gentle Dweller in the Desert, craz’d | By love and feeling and internal thought’, is strikingly similar to the figure of Majnun, the subject of several long narrative poems in Persian and Arabic, whose love for Layla (from whose presence he was banished) has driven him to live as a hermit in the desert, maddened by his love. His predicament was interpreted as an allegory of the soul’s pained longing for the presence of the divine (Datta ‘Deluge’, 13–14). As Datta shows, the story of Majnun was told in a poem by Isaac D’Israeli, a review of which appeared in

³⁰ Duncan Wu, ‘Wordsworth’s Reading of Ahmad Ardabili’, *Notes and Queries* 37: 4 (Dec 1990), 412.

³¹ William Wordsworth, *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 124, lines 55–6.

July 1799 in *The Monthly Review*, where Alexander Hamilton explained that the Arabic word ‘majnun’ meant ‘a man inspired, an enthusiast, a madman’. Fox himself translated a version of ‘Layla and Majnun’ by Hilali, and a trace of this same ‘Majnun’ figure – the love-crazed exile in the desert – can be found in Achmed’s love poems addressed to Selima.

In view of the number of sources that have been brought forward it might be foolhardy to argue that *Achmed* published in May 1797 had any influence on the orientalist poem ‘Kubla Khan’ that Coleridge – according to his own much-disputed account – wrote in the autumn of that same year.³² Fox’s ‘savage haunted forest’, his frequent mention of Khans, are hardly going to push Purchas from pole position. J. L. Lowes, the most indefatigable explorer of Coleridge’s literary sources for that poem, does not even mention Fox. However, given that ‘Kubla Khan’ is acknowledged by Coleridge to be an opium poem, the several appearances of opium in Fox’s *Achmed* merit consideration. There are two poems called ‘To the Poppy’ (25–7 and 81–2). One of these appeals to opium to bestow its visionary blessings:

Aid Fancy’s wing thro’ starry realms to soar;
And ope the treasures of mystic lore;
To flights sublime inspire the Poet’s lay,
Till sweet Delirium waft his soul away;
Away to unknown regions of delight,
Where forms irradiant meet the wondering sight,
Where happy spirits all benignant glow,
While Self-love’s giant mantle shrouds the world below. (27)

In addition to these two poems, Fox provides a long endnote describing opium’s social use in the orient: ‘Many of the Persians and other people of the East, are in the daily habit of using opium as an exhilarant, substituting it in the place of wine and cordials; but of these too many are apt to carry their love of it to an excess of inebriation’ (257).

Fox runs closest to Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ in his note on the Abdal, who are

a kind of Dervish of an irregular order. These are devotees of a very peculiar kind, some affecting the appearance of an idiotical stupidity, others that of an almost frantic enthusiasm, which is frequently produced by the intoxicating quantities of Benk, or opium, they are in the daily practice of swallowing; and in these reveries they often repeat proverbial sayings, or sentences from the Koran, which are received by the ignorant as from the mouth of an Oracle. (255–6)

The opium-inspired ‘frantic enthusiasm’ of this Abdal bears a close

³² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 3 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), II, pt. 1, 669–70.

resemblance to the figure of at the end of ‘Kubla Khan’:

Beware! Beware!
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,
 And close your eyes with holy dread:
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,
 And drank the milk of Paradise

(CPW I, pt1, 514)

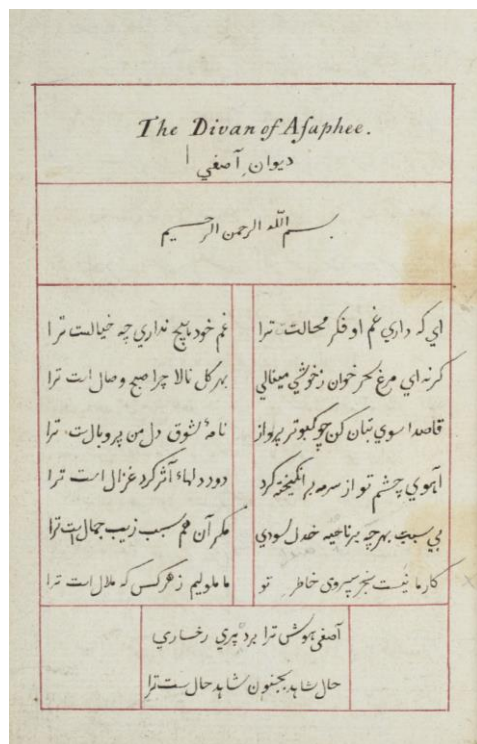
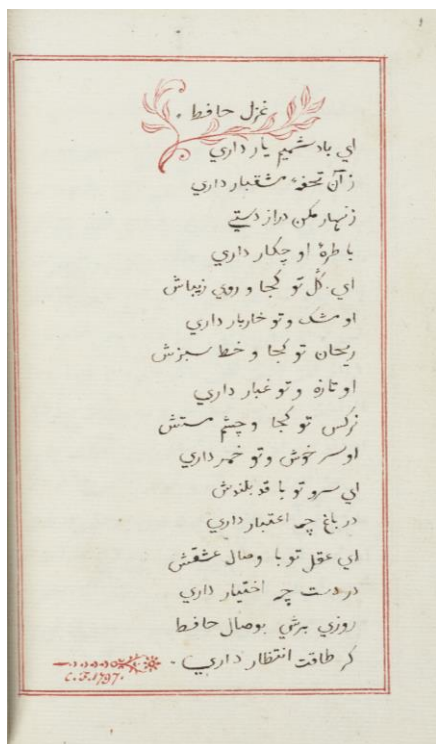
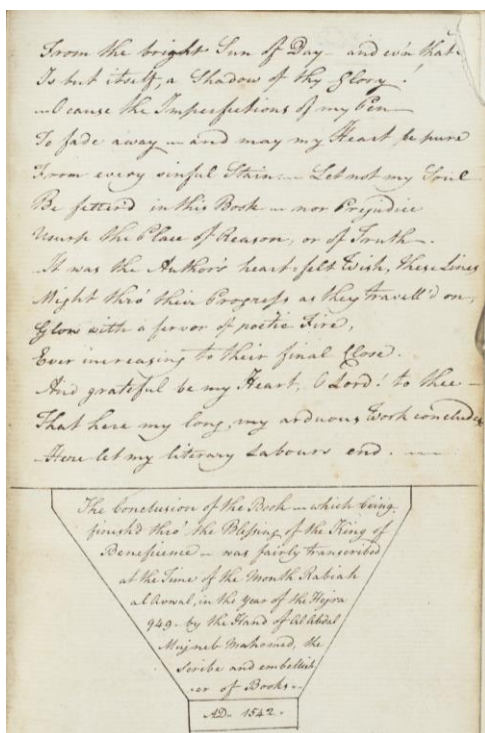
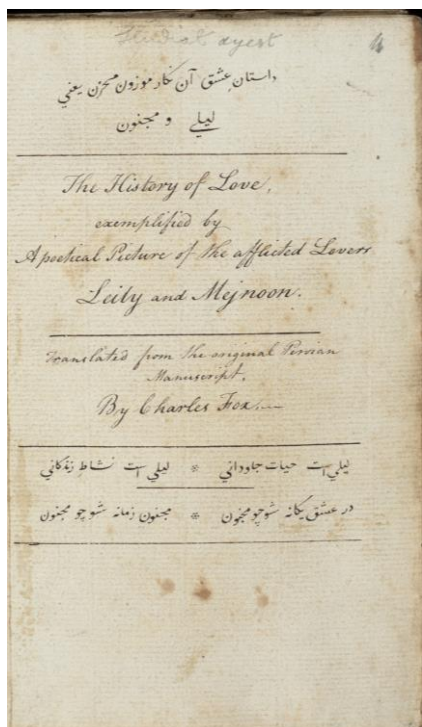
This parallel is suggestive, and a better match for this section of ‘Kubla Khan’ than the opium-free examples from Virgil and Plato that have been put forward as sources.³³ Knowledge of Fox’s description adds a fresh way to construe Coleridge’s possessed figure who emerges out of nowhere at the close of his poem. It is also useful contemporaneous context that deserves to be brought forward when considering how Coleridge regarded his own use of opium at this time. It was in March 1798 that he wrote his glowing description of laudanum: ‘how divine that repose is’. The imagery that follows – ‘a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees, in the very heart of a waste of Sands!’ (CL, I: 394) – gives a further impression of oriental fantasy.

Given the close relationship between Southey and Fox described earlier, one might expect a trace of this in the orientalist narrative epic *Thalaba the Destroyer*, which Southey started planning in 1799. As Tim Fulford has noted in the introduction to his edition, Southey ‘had no pre-existing deep learning about the Orient [...] but undertook a crash course even as he composed the poem’.³⁴ Fox willingly shared his extensive Orientalist knowledge with anyone who showed interest, and although Southey made no mention of Fox in his account of how *Thalaba* was written (3–4) he definitely made use of him. In the first edition of *Thalaba* Southey describes looking at ‘illuminated Persian manuscripts’ (194) without mentioning that Fox is their owner; but in the later editions of the poem from 1809 onwards, Southey refer to ‘Mr Fox’s collection of Persic books’ where he saw ‘an illuminated copy of Ferdusi’ (298). The likeliest explanation for Fox barely figuring in Southey’s notes is that Fox was effectively a middle-man who guided Southey to the sources, such as Jean Chardin, Barthélemy D’Herbelot, William Jones, that Southey preferred to cite as his authorities. In Southey’s note on the Simorg, a legendary giant bird, he points out (in 1809 and subsequent editions) that he had been misled by Fox when denoting the Simorg as male rather than female (297). This may be an inverted tribute, but it also stands as evidence of Fox’s influence.

(p.12 overleaf Fox’s MSS (l-r from top): ‘Leily and Mejnoon’, title and end pages; calligraphy signed / dated (red ink) ‘CF 1797’; *The Divan of Asaphee*.)

³³ Paul Magnuson in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 183 n2 and n3, cites precedents from Virgil and Plato that are entirely opium-free.

³⁴ Robert Southey: *Thalaba the Destroyer*, ed. Tim Fulford, *Poetical Works 1793–1810*, Vol III (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), x.



The Majnun figure that Kitty Datta has discussed in ‘Deluge’ can also be detected in *Thalaba*. The behaviour of love-maddened Thalaba at the grave of his lover Oneiza in Book VIII, which gives rise to the warning ‘Go not among the Tombs, Old Man! | There is a madman there’ (116), is a classic episode in the tale of Majnun collapsing at Layla’s grave.

Fulford describes *Thalaba* as ‘the first of a new, Romantic, genre, an updated Oriental tale, now in verse and with a weighty apparatus of factual footnotes to convince the reader of its historical veracity’ (viii–ix). This is a perfect description of how Fox’s *Notes Historical and Explanatory* have convinced generations of scholars that Achmed was a historical figure. Here Fox’s *Achmed* can surely be adduced as a model for Southey’s approach.

Charles Fox: Politics, Religion and Resignation

When Southey travelled to Portugal in April 1800, he sailed via Fox’s home town of Falmouth, from where he wrote to Cottle saying he had ‘heard a good story of Charles Fox. when his house here was on fire & he found all efforts to save it useless – he went up the next hill to make a drawing of the fire. the best instance of philosophy I ever heard’ (RSL, 20 Apr 1800). When Southey retold the story, in the guise of the visiting Spaniard Don Espriella, he called this ‘an admirable instance of English phlegm!’³⁵ His first choice, ‘philosophy’, was nearer the mark. The story of Fox philosophically sketching his burning house has, as we have seen, also been told by Polwhele, but no one telling this story has mentioned that one of Fox’s *Achmed* poems depicted Persian fire worshippers behaving in just this way.

As Fox explained in a note to the poem: ‘Superstition has been known to extend its influence so fully over the Gaures [Zoroastrians], that many of them, when their habitations have been on fire, instead of endeavouring to stop the progress of the destructive element, which they call Azar have fallen prostrate before it, and, after returning thanks as to a benevolent divinity, have fed its flames with offerings of oil’ (265). Knowing his personal history, Fox’s sly use of the word ‘superstition’ – to describe behaviour that matches his own – becomes one more instance of the games he liked to play, at the expense of his unwitting readers, for the amusement of those in the know. But it would be wrong to label him as a mere trickster.

What was Fox’s ‘philosophy’? In his notes Fox links Achmed’s spiritual rebirth to the esoteric wisdom of the Sufis, who, living in

voluntary poverty [...] appropriate a certain proportion of time to reading – to the acquisition of scientific knowledge—viewing the beauties of nature. [...] Some of them, who dedicate the chief part of their time to silent retirement, *seek*, in an abnegation of the world and of self, the enjoyment of a spiritual intercourse with the Supreme Being (xxii).

³⁵ Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. Jack Simmons (London: Cresset Press, 1951), 19.

Although his eulogist J. P. mentions Fox's anti-despotism in the context of his religious affiliation, the impression one gets is of someone engaged in 'abnegation of the world' through private study, someone preferring the contemplative to the active life. There is plenty of evidence that Fox came increasingly to find spiritual nourishment from the poems he was translating, and from his study of Islam.

Two friendships bring out this serious side. Adam Clarke, the Methodist preacher turned biblical scholar, who became a friend of Fox's while studying oriental languages to further his study of the Bible, describes a friendship born of mutual interest, and prints a valuable letter from Fox that takes up four pages.³⁶ J. W. Etheridge, a biographer of Clarke adds to this: 'nor was Mr Clarke's communication with his friend without a most beneficial religious, as well as intellectual, fruitage'.³⁷ As a result – according to Etheridge, who was also a Methodist – Fox was turned by Clarke into a 'devout believer'; but Clarke's own account of his friendship with Fox stressed a communion of equals. One interesting sign of this is Clarke's presentation to the 1807 Liverpool Methodist Conference of a written paper which is headed 'Bismillah Arahmani Arraheemi!' – 'In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate'.³⁸

CHAP. V.]

REV. ADAM CLARKE, LL.D.

219

"BISMILLAH! ARAHMANI ARRAHEEMI!"

"TAKING into consideration the very desolate state of the superannuated preachers and widows in the Methodist Connexion, and well knowing that the provision made by the Preachers' Annuitant Society must in every case fall very far short of even providing them with the necessaries of life, it is proposed,—

"1. That an asylum or college be erected with as much speed as possible for the reception of superannuated preachers, and the widows of those who have died in our Lord's work.

"2. That the asylum be erected in the vicinity of some large town, in a healthy situation, where the necessaries of life may be found cheap.

Another sign of Fox's affiliation to Islam appears in his friendship with the young Bristol poet William Isaac Roberts, who died at the age of twenty. Roberts's letters show him at barely seventeen valuing Fox highly as a mentor: 'He is a treasure, [...] and I shall not fail to profit by his wisdom'.³⁹ A few months later he opens discussion with a friend on whether Mohammed was

³⁶ *Account*, II: 45–6 and 56–60.

³⁷ J. W. Etheridge, *The Life of the Rev. Adam Clarke*, 2nd edn (London, 1858), 384.

³⁸ Etheridge, *Life of Clarke*, 219.

³⁹ William Isaac Roberts, *Poems and Letters*, [eds Paul Moon James and Edward Hogg] (London, 1811), 126.

‘an impostor or an enthusiast’. Roberts resolves to be a defender of ‘Mahommed’ and to ‘attack prejudices which have been rooted for ages’ (137). He then gives Fox’s opinion:

I was lately at our friend F[ox]’s, and in the course of conversation introduced the name of the ‘Prophet.’ He does not scruple to call him *the first man* that ever existed. he says the accounts we have of him are vague and uncertain, and that the Genius of Mahomedanism is totally misunderstood. (140)

Fox’s notes to *Achmed* approve tolerance between members of different religions or sects within religions, and argues that – contrary to opinions commonly held in Europe – Christians and Jews have been tolerated in the Islamic countries (xxvi–xxvii). Etheridge’s view of Fox’s ‘somewhat wavering mind’ regarding ‘the truth of the Gospel’ (384) might be a misreading of Fox’s openness to alternative views. Fox is commonly described as a Quaker. This is not correct: he may have been born as one, but he was married according to the rites of the Church of England, and he was buried in the cemetery of Argyle Independent Chapel in Bath.⁴⁰ Furthermore, when he dated the progress of his Persian translations in his manuscripts, he did not use the Quaker numerical date forms. Many of Fox’s translations from Persian poets such as Hafiz, as preserved in J. B. B. Clarke’s catalogue of his father’s Persian manuscripts, are addresses to a God that could belong in any monotheistic religion.

Did Fox’s preference for an apprehension of God that crossed the borders of different religions have any impact on the Romantics? The answer would seem to be no. Stuart Andrews gives a useful survey of the reception of Islam by Coleridge and Southey, dwelling particularly on their aborted project to write an epic in hexameters on the life of Mohammed.⁴¹ Their mixed feelings and reservations about Islam are too evident to be denied: Coleridge described Islam as ‘deadly to morals, to science, to civic freedom: no society could be progressive under its influence’ (Andrews, 113). Southey’s attraction to the life of Mohammed as a subject for poetry is very much in line with his fascination with Joan of Arc’s self-belief in her divine inspiration. He wondered in a letter whether Mohammed was ‘self-deceived, or knowingly a deceiver? if an enthusiast, the question again occurs wherein does real inspiration differ from mistaken?’ (RSL 29 Jul 1799). But Southey made it equally clear in the same letter that he regarded Islam as a religion of ‘brutal ignorance & ferocity’, ‘a system of degradation & depopulation whose overthrow is to be desired as one great step to general amelioration.’

Although Fox did not succeed in persuading Coleridge and Southey to view

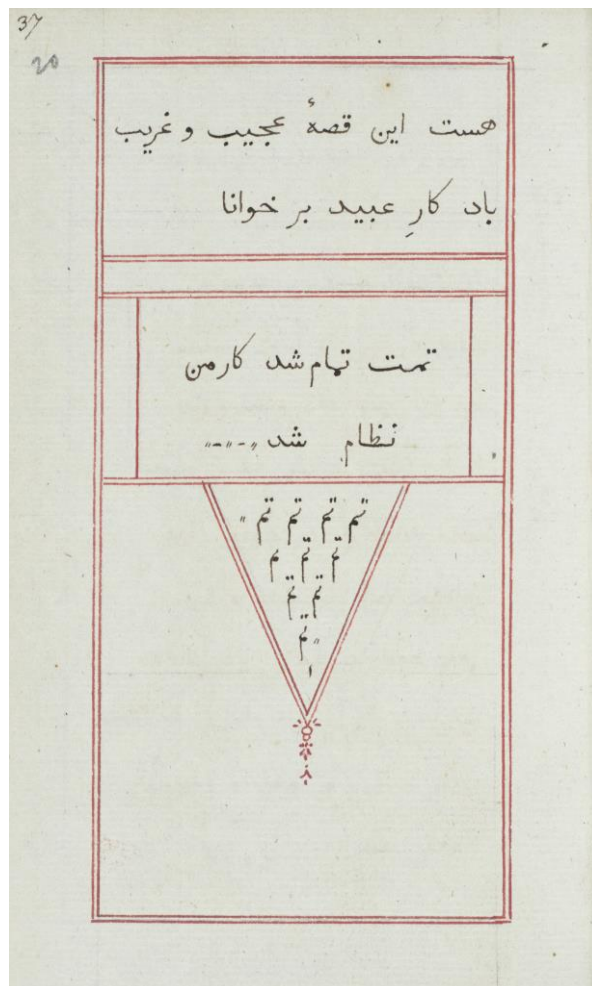
⁴⁰ Bath Record Office: <<https://www.batharchives.co.uk/cemeteries/independent-burial-ground-argyle-chapel-snow-hill/charles-fox>> [accessed 27/06/2018].

⁴¹ Stuart Andrews, ‘Southey, Coleridge and Islam,’ *The Wordsworth Circle*, 46: 2 (Spring 2015), 109–116. For the proposed *Life of Mohammed* see 110.

Islam in a favourable light, he was not a zealous proponent of any one religion. The ideal he looked for – the ‘enjoyment of a spiritual intercourse with the Supreme Being’ (*Achmed*, xxii) – was more universal than that; he was open enough to meet the Romantics on their own ground and assimilate their view of Nature as a living source of spiritual renewal. His alter ego Achmed Ardebeili, was a Persian Romantic who found God in Nature:

All hail, ye mountain solitudes! from you
And from your untamed inmates will I claim
Those calm retreats that nature’s children knew,
Ere Education taught one artful aim.

Tho’ here recluse, O GOD! inspire my mind
With love of thee, of Nature, and Mankind. (*Achmed*, 79)



Fox's calligraphy arranged in geometric structure.
(John Rylands Library, Persian MS 362. Copyright of the University of Manchester)

Appendix: Fox's supposed authorship of the 'Cornish Eclogues'

Our only source for the attribution of these 'Cornish Eclogues' to Charles Fox is Richard Polwhele, the prolific writer of Cornish histories, who first printed these eclogues in 1806 as an anonymous 'specimen [...] of the Cornish provincial dialect' that had 'long circulated in MS. through the West of Cornwall'. These consisted of 'Cornish Dialogue Between Two Old Men', 'A Dialogue Between Gracey Penrose and Mally Trevisky', and a six-line fragment – quoted from memory – of 'A Dialogue between two young men'. He also noted that 'I have seen several other pieces of the same description' (*The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters of Cornwall* (London, 1806), 24–6).

Ten years later, in 1816, when writing about 'Literary Characters of Cornwall' in his seven volume *History of Cornwall*, Polwhele first identified Charles Fox as 'the ingenious author of the "Cornish Eclogues"', and added a brief but ill-informed summary of his life (*The History of Cornwall*, a new edn, 7 vols (London, 1816), V: 205).

In 1831 Polwhele reprinted the 'Cornish Eclogues', adding further hearsay about Fox and contesting the claim of 'Dr Paris' who had recently printed the second of these dialogues attributing its authorship to John Wolcot, a.k.a. Peter Pindar, the Cornish satirical poet. (See *Biographical Sketches in Cornwall*, 3 vols (Truro, 1831), II: 62–8, and [A. D. Paris], *A Guide to the Mount's Bay and the Land's End*, 2nd edn (London, 1824), vii and 266–9).

The ODNB accepts uncritically Polwhele's attribution of these eclogues to Fox, but there are reasons for doubt. 'Cornish Dialogue between two Old Men' was set during the fear of French invasion, which occurred in 1798 when Charles Fox had been settled in Bristol for ten years and was intent on his Persian poems. Polwhele gives Charles Fox a different parentage (son of Joseph, a grocer), which – given the number of Charles Foxes in Cornwall – makes it possible he has confused two people of the same name. Polwhele's incomplete representation of Fox's career after leaving Cornwall also gives the impression he relies on local hearsay rather than on direct knowledge from Fox himself.