

## Thomas Chatterton, the Boy Poet of Bristol.



THE intermittent discussions which for well nigh a century waged around the name of Thomas Chatterton as to the authenticity of the poems attributed by him to an imagined monk of the fifteenth century, named Thomas Rowley, left his name to the mercy of a host of critics too prejudiced to fairly judge his character or his poetical works.

It is only about fourteen years ago since the Rev. Walter W. Skeat, LL.D., Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, marshalled the proofs of the spuriousness of the Rowley poems and analyzed them with such convincing effect that it would be puerile folly now to maintain their genuineness. Mr. Skeat, also, at the same time, presented in two small volumes the poetical works and letters of Chatterton to the public in a more methodical form and as much as possible, in chronological order, which has done much to redeem them from their former chaos. He has also largely modernized the spurious antique poems by supplying equivalents for old English words, thereby ridding them of their former want of interest or attractiveness to the general public. Interest is now chiefly attached to the strange life of this ill-fated poet, who died in his teens, his double acting as a pretended transcriber of ancient poetry, and writer of modern verses, his extraordinary genius and complex character.

In a small and obscure dwelling on Pile Street, Bristol, one of the chief commercial and manufacturing ports of England, Thomas Chatterton first saw the light on the 20th of November, 1752. It was but three months before this that his father, Thomas Chatterton, Sr., died. Left in his childhood dependent upon a poor widow, who, by her skilled needlework, earned for him and his little sister, her only other child, the bare necessities of subsistence, life at the very outset must have appeared to him in but sombre colors at its best. Not long after his father's death, his mother removed to a house near St. Mary Redcliff Church, "that mastery of a human hand, the pride of Bristol and the Western land," as described by Chatterton. The office of sexton of this church was held, during the poet's life, by Charles Phillips, his uncle, to whom it had come down through little less than two centuries in the Chatterton family. The young orphan, availing himself of the friendship of his uncle, the sexton, frequently resorted to the Church of St. Mary Redcliff, the church in which he had been baptized, and where his boyish mind, in wondering thought,