

# On Titivillus, Patron Demon of Scribes

by [Chris Hutchinson](#) • December 13, 2013 • *The Puritan*



Titivillus looks on eagerly while his friend Ambrose reviews his latest manuscript.

Chris Hutchinson's *A Brief History of the Short-Lived* was reviewed in *Issue XIX* of *The Puritan*. The review uses the character Titivillus, a medieval trouble maker featured in the book, as its entrance into understanding the poems. So we asked Chris to tell us what drew him to this character. This was first published on the original *Town Crier* blog. Chris Hutchinson's latest book, *Jonas in Frames*, will come out in the Spring of 2014 with [Goose Lane](#).

One of the stories is that medieval monks invented Titivillus, the Patron Demon of Calligraphers, to blame for their mistakes copying manuscripts. They imagined that Titivillus was forced to interfere in their work, under pressure, as he was to deliver one thousand sacks full of manuscript errors each day to the devil who then recorded the names of the negligent scribes in a book to be read on Judgement Day. With the advent of the printing press Titivillus' responsibilities increased, as did this mythical minion's reputation for causing trouble.

Something like Titivillus haunts me today, a sort of ghost in the ghost in the machine. My little demon is lodged somewhere between my eyes and my grey matter where he likes to take possession of and flip around not only letters and numbers but spatial memories and logical relations. Some people call this dyslexia, and it can be a crazy-making affliction, especially when faced with an income tax form or a Tokyo subway map or a set of Wittgensteinian premises. But for a poet there may be some advantages to being possessed.

I think most creative writers pay heed to misreadings, spell-checker mix-ups and slips of the tongue or pen. Errors can be awesomely generative and, according to the

Freudians, psychically revealing. Note also how stumbling onto a good metaphor has the feeling of a happy accident—falling suddenly into that strangely luminous fissure which separates the so-called tenor and vehicle. What is poetry if not a loosening of the strictures and structures of literalness and normative sense? Maybe it's not surprising that the kind of poetry I'm drawn to tends to side-step the intellect, flirt with 'inaccuracy' and generally succeed by teetering on the edge its own destruction.

In my poem "Titivillus" I wanted to *re-vision* this fabulist pest, to imagine a version slightly distorted from what had previously been conceived—granted that throughout history his protean character has already morphed several times. As medievalist Kathy Cawsey writes: "(Titivillus) is pervasive yet elusive, appearing again and again in drama, sermons, sculpture and art, engaging and amusing in appearance yet deadly earnest in purpose" (434). So here I'd like to swerve again, thinking of yet another way to (mis)appropriate or 'misread' the myth: I give you Titivillus, Patron Demon of Dyslectic Poets.

The way I see it, while he may prevent some of us from becoming copy editors or Wall Street traders, perhaps this trickster of the mind's eye can teach us something else: how to see cockeyed, think out of kilter and, as Emily Dickinson famously put it, "tell all the truth but tell it slant." Maybe the truth is that language—with its slippages, ellipses, ambiguities and epistemic limitations—is itself an inherently shifty thing, and it's only Titivillus who can give it to us straight.

*Work Cited :*

Cawsey, Kathy. "Titivillus and the "Kyrkchaterars": Strategies of Control in the Middle Ages." *Studies in Philosophy*. 102.4 (2005): 434. Print.