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The Romantic Viking

Renegotiating the Cultural Roots of English Literature

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The Romantic Viking:

Renegotiating the Cultural Roots of English Literature

Clara Riis Ottosen-Støtt

This paper deals with the reception of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry in late eighteenth-century England. Through the works of Thomas Percy, it investigates how the Scandinavian North was represented as the ethnic birth-place of English poetry and how this became part of an ongoing struggle for gaining cultural capital and defining national identity in Britain and Europe during the early phases of Romanticism.

In the late eighteenth century, national literatures were becoming an increasingly important issue across Europe, as it entered the early stages that would lead to the construction of national "romanticisms." In Britain, this was particularly tied to the publication of James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry, which sparked a Celtic revival. Creating a strong national and cultural identity for the English people thus became an urgent and highly politicised matter. In this period we see an increasing competition between national, ethnic and political identities. The antiquarian Thomas Percy influenced the development by offering an argument for an *English* identity rooted in Anglo-Saxon/Norse

tradition and in a shared *Gothic* ancestry (i.e. Germanic/Norse in the terminology of the day). His work inspired a surge of interest in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, an interest which later developed into a veritable craze for everything related to the Vikings with the Victorians. Ancient Scandinavia was increasingly idealised as the place of origin for English national literature and character and incorporated into Gothicist theories of cultural transmission. In Old Norse poetry, a source of the sublime was found. This central concept of Romantic writing found the perfect vehicle in the images of the North with its wild, untamed landscapes and imaginative mythology, and writers seized upon the opportunities of utilising the North as a setting for exploring the supernatural.

Thomas Percy

Thomas Percy (1729–1811) was one of the key figures of both the ballad revival and the interest in Nordic matters. He was employed as personal chaplain to the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland and was later made Bishop of Dromore. He published two works on Chinese literature before he brought out *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* in 1763, a small collection of translated Norse-Icelandic poems that followed in the wake of Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, published in 1760. This was then followed by the ballad collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which is particularly important for the essays appended to it, since these are concerned with the origins of metrical romance and the nature of the English minstrels. The final important work for our purposes is *Northern Antiquities*, which Percy translated from the French original by Paul-Henri Mallet and published in 1770.

One of the most crucial aspects of Thomas Percy's antiquarian project was the notion of how the Scandinavian scalds were the ancestors of the English

minstrels. By constructing a history of the minstrels as the inheritors of a noble legacy from the North, Percy managed to create a separate and desirable heritage for English poetry, clearly distinguishable from both Celtic and classical traditions.[1] There are many interesting aspects of this theory which have not yet been coherently and thoroughly treated, so in this section we will be looking in detail at some of those issues.

Poetic Spirit

We may begin by exploring how Percy represents the poetry of the North and its relation to England on the textual level. Percy begins the preface to his *Five Pieces* with an exposition of the poetic spirit of the Scandinavians, and indeed, the whole purpose of the collection seems to be to convince the reader of the significance of the poetic nature and capacity of the "ancient Danes." He claims that, despite their bad reputation, "there is one feature of their character of a more amiable cast; which, tho' not so generally known, no less belongs to them: and that is, an amazing fondness for poetry." Already in this introductory remark, we clearly sense Percy manipulating his material: it is not enough to state that the Danes possess a relatively unknown body of poetry, they are deliberately described as being "amazingly fond" of poetry. Percy continues to elaborate on the image of these poetry-loving barbarians:

> Of these compositions a great multitude are extant, some of them in print, others preserved in MS in the libraries of the north. All of them demonstrate that poetry was once held there in the highest estimation. The invention of it was attributed to the gods, and ranked among the most valuable gifts conferred on mortals.[2]

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1 These theories were proposed primarily in *Five Pieces* and *Northern Antiquities*.
2 Percy, "Preface," *Five Pieces,* no pagination.

Percy's own agenda is clear. He confidently points out how highly the Danes valued their poetry without feeling obliged to provide any documentation. He simply states his ideas as self-explanatory "facts." He creates an image of a nation infused with poetry, taking the very existence of the poems as sufficient evidence that poetry was "held in the highest estimation."

Even more significant is his representation of the skalds. These are cast in the role of a noble class of history-writers and court poets at the top of society: "Those that excelled in it, were distinguished by the first honours of the state: were constant attendants on their kings, and were often employed on the most important commissions."[3] In his *Essay on the Ancient Minstrels* in *Reliques,* Percy goes even further, and sounds almost rapturous in his description of the skalds: "Their skill was considered as something divine; their attendance was solicited by kings: and they were everywhere loaded with honours and rewards."[4] There was apparently much to be said in favour of the scalds and the social role they had played in society.

Among the poems collected in *Five Pieces*, the one most concerned with the role of poetry and the scald is *The Ransome of Egill the Scald,* originally Egill Skalla-Grimsson's *Höfuðslausn* (Head-Ransom). The poem is taken from *Egill's Saga* and is a poem that Egill composed in praise of King Eirikr Blóðøx, who held him captured. According to this story, the king was so impressed with the poem composed in his honour that he agreed to release Egill instead of executing him as it had been planned.[5] On this basis, we would expect to find a very fine example of court poetry, and indeed, Percy introduces the piece by quoting Mallet's description of the poem as "an illustrious proof of the high

[3] Percy, "Preface," *Five Pieces*.
[4] Percy, *Minstrels*, p. xxii
[5] O'Donoghue, *Literature,* p. 115. The spelling of the Icelandic names is taken from here as well.

reverence in which poets and their art were held among the northern nations."[6] However, Heather O'Donoghue points to a "hollow, brittle quality about it's [*sic*] praise of Eirikr" and suggests that the whole poem was in fact an inferior poem made by Egill to fool the king, who lacked the intelligence to see through it.[7] What is more interesting about the poem is the significance of its employment of end-rhyme. This was something not supposed to have been used in Germanic composition until significantly later in poetic history.[8] Percy takes this as proof that the skalds invented the method independently of the Christian tradition, and therefore as a proof of their advanced skills. He corroborates his claim by pointing out that the scalds would not have adopted it from the monks, whom they "held in derision."[9] This was an important point for Percy, since one of the qualities of ancient poetry was that it should be seen as independent of Roman-Christian influences. If Norse poetry was seen as imitative of classical tradition, it would belittle Northern achievement. The poem would also have to be dated much later (as indeed it probably needs to be).[10] Gauti Kristmannsson comments that Percy assumes (due to ignorance of historical fact) that Goths/Norsemen knew rhyme before they came into contact with the monks. Percy's conclusions were "ideologically motivated and move within well developed neo-classical paradigms as well as new ones drafted by the general trend in primitivism and himself."[11] Robert Rix further adds that Percy would go on to claim that the Nordic skalds had actually invented rhyme and thereby emphasised even more clearly the independence of Gothic literary culture from monkish influence.[12]

[6] Percy, *Five Pieces*, p. 45
[7] O'Donoghue, *Literature,* p. 115
[8] Ibid. p. 115
[9] Percy, "Preface," *Five Pieces*.
[10] See O'Donoghue, *Literature*, p. 115. She notes that the use of end rhyme has been taken by many scholars as a proof of its inauthenticity, because end rhyme was unknown to Germanic tradition until much later.
[11] Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy*, p. 135
[12] Rix, "Alternative," p. 211

A further criticism of Percy's reading of the poem concerns his unquestioned acceptance of Mallet's statement that the poem was "pronounced extempore" despite its highly complicated style and "great variety of measures".[13] In this remark, we see Percy's insistence on an ideal of Norse poetry which is the purity and originality of the language and style, rejecting the possibility of later additions and embellishments.

Percy's Agenda

So why did Percy go to such great lengths to create this image of the Danes and their skalds? There are multiple reasons for this. Firstly, there was the urge to represent the skalds as noble ancestors of the English minstrels and thereby argue for the long history and unbroken chronological continuity of English literature. Anglo-Saxon poetry had been rejected by both Percy and the important literary historian Thomas Warton,[14] on the grounds of not living up to the expectations of ancient poetry. Thus, as Margaret Clunies-Ross expresses it, there was a "problem with discontinuity in the English tradition."[15] Cut off from its Anglo-Saxon roots, English literature could not be dated back very far, and thus lacked a connection to the ancient past. Ancient tradition had to be found elsewhere. It was consequently relocated to Scandinavia. In order to do this, Percy had to emphasise the importance of skalds in Danish society, portraying them as close to the powers that be and as a respected elite. Secondly, he had to account for the way in which the art of the scalds could be linked to the English minstrels. He did this by arguing that it was likely that the Vikings would have brought these important poets with them to England and thereby kept the

[13] Percy, *Five Pieces*, p. 46

[14] Thomas Warton was a friend and colleague of Thomas Percy, and an influential scholar at the time. His major work was *History of English Poetry* (1774), to which was appended a *Dissertation: Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe*, in which he expressed views that differed somewhat from Percy's.

[15] Clunies-Ross, *Norse Muse*, p. 48

tradition alive: "As these honours were paid to Poetry and Song (…) we may reasonably conclude that they would not lay aside all their regard for men of this sort immediately on quitting their German forests."[16] In order for that argument to be credible, the reader had to be convinced that the poets were an indispensable part of Danish society. However, Percy does not provide any evidence of this, but relies entirely on conjecture, which was accepted in eighteenth-century antiquarianism. Percy transfers the high status of the Norse skalds to their literary descendants, the English minstrels, and similarly claims a high standing for them in their contemporary society. Clunies-Ross analyses this inductive reasoning as necessary for Percy's argument. The "project" in *Reliques* was to rehabilitate "modern English traditional verse, like ballads and songs, that clearly had oral antecedents and, in the eighteenth century, were associated with the common people."[17] Rehabilitating Old Norse poetry and English poetry was thus two sides of the same coin, since the latter was claimed to spring from the former.

Percy also created links between the English and Danish traditions through a strategy of subtle hinting that deliberately shied away from clear explication. One of the best examples of this can be found in the introduction to *Five Pieces*, where Percy explains the relationship between the Nordic languages: "The Islandic is the mother of the modern Swedish and Danish tongues, in like manner as the Anglo-Saxon is the parent of our English."[18] This comparison does not really serve any other purpose than to point out similarities between the languages. Percy continues by remarking the kinship between English and Icelandic, since they both share a common Gothic root. He argues the relevance of studying Icelandic, as it is an aid for understanding Old English. I agree with Gauti Kristmannsson when he interprets these comments as "a

[16] Percy, "Minstrels," p. xxii

[17] Clunies-Ross, *Norse Muse*, p. 49

[18] Percy, "Preface", *Five Pieces*. See also Rix: "Alternative," p. 205

conscious attempt at the amalgamation of the Old-Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures."[19] Percy's arguments are clearly ideologically motivated. As Kristmannsson further points out, the language in the poems that Percy translated is of a much later date, since it was written hundreds of years after the Viking age, and thus is of a very different character. Of this fact, Percy would have been well aware.[20] In the previous passage, Percy has been talking about the scalds, and, again, we find a seemingly random remark which may not be entirely innocent. In a footnote, Percy claims that "The name of BARD also (Isl. Barda) was not unknown among the Islandic poets."[21] Again, this note seems to serve no other purpose than creating links between English and Nordic cultures that Percy wanted to establish.

It is useful at here to return to the Clunies-Ross's commentary on translating Icelandic poetry in England, since she puts forward another important point. She writes: "To make them [the ballads] both interesting and acceptable to a polite readership they had to be presented as the near-contemporary manifestations of a long, antique and sublime tradition which had been handed down through a class of oral poets of high social status."[22] This quote neatly sums up many issues of relevance to Percy's essentially patriotic project: the establishment a noble literary history for Anglo-Saxon England and the pressure to publish something that would satisfy reader expectations of a professional and cultivated literary tradition. According to Percy, poetry was clearly presented as a pastime of the upper-classes. Percy's contemporary, the always critically vigilant and keenly class-conscious antiquarian Joseph Ritson, strongly objected to this idea, calling Percy a robber who appropriated the

[19] Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy*, p. 130
[20] Ibid. p. 130
[21] Percy, "Preface," *Five Pieces*.
[22] Clunies-Ross, *Norse Muse,* p. 49

common man's ballads for an upper-class audience.[23] However, it can be argued, Percy's notion can be seen in connection with a widespread feeling amongst poets that they had lost their original position close to power and that they had become marginalised in their contemporary society.[24] Poets were no longer a vital part of defining society and its morals. Thus, emphasising the original, important, role of the poets expressed a desire to reclaim a place for the poets at the centre of social development. In this way, the role of the poet was introduced as a politicised issue. The skalds were seen as a benchmark for how poets and poetry should be perceived in society, and their high status was used to implicitly criticise the contemporary degradation of poetry in England. Percy's Jeremiad would have resonated with many mid-eighteenth-century poets, and it struck a chord with emergent Romanticism.

Percy's idea of the minstrels received mixed reviews, and it became the object of much debate in antiquarian and literary circles. Thomas Warton shared many of his views and expanded on the elevated status of the minstrels in his essay "*Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe*," in vol. 1 of *The History of English Poetry* (1774).[25] But others were less inclined to follow the argument. Generally speaking, it can be said that the antiquarians were critical, while the poets were more positive and seized on the opportunity to find inspiration in Percy's fieldwork and also to reconstruct their imaginary role along the lines outlined above.

One of the earliest critics was the antiquarian Samuel Pegge, who read a paper to the Society of Antiquaries in 1766 complaining about Percy's incorrect and "ill-grounded" image of the minstrels.[26] This critique led Percy to thoroughly revise his essay, adding and abundance of notes and references to

[23] Butler, "Popular Antiquarians," p. 332
[24] Gaull, *Romanticism*, p. 257
[25] See, for instance, Kathryn Sutherland, "Native Poet."
[26] Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy*, p. 141

substantiate his claims. As Kristmannsson observes, the critique Percy came to face from fellow antiquarians was not unexpected, since his methods of innovation and editing went beyond normal antiquarian practice. In fact, Percy was "fusing together hitherto separate worlds and produced the synthetic artefact of art as an historical and national monument."[27] These two worlds were the scholarly and the transference of neo-classical aesthetics to non-classical works. The latter was startling for many antiquarians. Kathryn Sutherland, in here article "The Native Poet: The Influence of Percy's Minstrel from Beattie to Wordsworth" (1982), describes the intense debates that followed the publication of *Reliques*, but more importantly, she traces the significant influence on subsequent writers, particularly the Romantics who embraced the imaginative appeal of Percy's wandering minstrels. But before we turn to discuss this, we must first look at a few examples of how the skald was represented in poetry.

Writing the Scald

In 1795, Robert Southey, one of the major Romantic poets and Poet Laureate from 1813, published the poem *The Race of Odin*. In this poem, Odin is treated as a historical figure, not as a god. The poem is mostly concerned with Odin's desire to revenge himself on Rome after apparently having been defeated and forced to flee his homeland. The relevant passage is the following, taken from a description of the virtues of the Scandinavian people:

> Freedom, with joy, beheld the noble race,
> And fill'd each bosom with her vivid fire;
> Nor vice, nor luxury, debase
> The free-born offspring of the free-born sire;
> There genuine poesy, in freedom bright,
> Diffus'd o'er all her clear, her all-enlivening light.

[27] Ibid. p. 142

> (…)
> See where the murderer Egill stands,
> He grasps the harp with skilful hands,
> And pours the soul-emoving tide of song;
> My admiration holds the listening throng:
> The royal sire forgets his murder'd son;
> Eric forgives; a thousand years
> Their swift revolving course have run,
> Since thus the bard could check the father's tears,
> Could soothe his soul to peace,
> And never shall the fame of Egill cease.[28]

Southey's representation of the Norse skald and the poetic spirit here is clearly inspired by and consistent with the image Percy cultivated. The Scandinavians are described in very positive terms, and their capacity for poetry is mentioned among qualities like freedom and virtuousness. In Southey's version, the people are infused with and enveloped in the spirit of poetry as a result of their free and pure way of life – it is portrayed as a almost a force of nature that thrives under these circumstances. Likewise, the skald, personified by Egill and inspired by Percy, is shown to be endowed with a divine gift of "soul-emoving" poetry. The focus is on the power of the poetry to move and stir the emotions, and how it is almost magically able to "soothe his soul to peace."[29] Southey here takes up Percy's insistence on the high status that poetry allegedly held for the ancient Norsemen. In many ways this was in harmony with the discourses of *primitivism* at the time.

A rather more extreme version of this preconception is exemplified in the later *Select Icelandic Poetry* (1804) by William Herbert (1778–1847). Herbert was an otherwise very keen and critical scholar, but he allows himself to state that northern warriors were "habituated to speak in verse on every important

[28] Cited in Rix, "Robert Southey" in *Norse Themes,* forthcoming.
[29] See quoted text above, penultimate line.

incident; and the whole of their life was like a tragic opera."[30] Other images that were typically associated with the skalds are those of the warrior poet and historian, also consistent with Percy's interpretation.

Romanticism and the Minstrel as Literary Figure

In relation to the English minstrel, the Romantics would re-create this character as a symbol of the ideal poet. Kathryn Sutherland describes how the minstrel became a pivotal figure in much poetry of the later eighteenth century, which was deeply concerned with the role of the poet. According to Sutherland, this bardic versifier came to "represent a native strain in poetry, independent of classical precedents, a strain which emphasises not only imaginative freedom but notions of social liberty as well; and he often proves an attractive vessel for the poet's own experience."[31] In a similar vein, Marilyn Gaull explains how the minstrel figure became the new "hero" for poets, who preferred the partially fictional minstrels and bards constructed by Percy, Thomas Gray and James Macpherson to the real thing.[32] For instance, we see this in the poetry of the Scottish poet James Beattie (1735– 803), who "apotheosized" the minstrel tradition in his poem *The Minstrel: or, The Progress of Genius* (1771–1774). In this poem, Beattie created the model character of the lonely, wandering and misunderstood poet, who tries to come to terms with the world. The protagonist, Edwin, is described in the following way: "The neighbors star'd, yet bless'd the lad: / Some deem'd him wondrous wise, and some believ'd him mad." In turn, Beattie's figure became an inspiration for Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron and Scott among others.[34] In fact, Beattie's minstrel was directly influenced by

[30] Quoted in O'Donoghue, *Literature*, p. 123
[31] Sutherland, "Native Poet," p. 414
[32] Gaull, *Romanticism,* p. 261. Gray's contribution on this subject was his ode *The Bard* from 1757 about the last Celtic bard facing extinction.
[34] Ibid. p. 261.

Percy, which he himself declares in a letter to Thomas Gray in 1769: "The first hint of it was suggested by Mr Percy's Essay on the English Minstrels. There was something in the character of the Minstrel there described, which struck me and pleased me."[35] As Kathryn Sutherland points out, Beattie owes to Percy his understanding of the minstrel as having a "sacred" profession and in placing his ancestry in the North." Where Beattie departs from Percy and Gray, however, is in the way he creates a personal connection with the minstrel and uses him as an "extended autobiographical metaphor." The minstrel becomes a mirror of Beattie's own experiences and development as a poet.[36] The devotion to nature, the imagination, melancholy and a moral dimension are what characterize the use of the minstrel figure in later Romantic poetry.

In conclusion, we should note how Percy's ideas of the Norse skald-cum-minstrel gained a life of its own in the hands of the Romantic poets, and how these ideas came to serve a Romantic agenda. For all the historiographically dubious methods that Percy applied in bringing out this figure, he is responsible for constructing a usable notion of a "noble" minstrel from the scraps of a dead tradition.

[35] Sutherland, "Native Poet", p. 422
[36] Ibid. p. 423

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