

## *Introduction*

### *Snatched from the Fire: The Case of Thomas Percy*

In 1867, John Hales (1836–1914) and Frederick J. Furnivall (1825–1910), two distinguished Victorian men of letters and enthusiasts for earlier literature (Gregory 2006), produced a new edition of a very famous poetic miscellany: the seventeenth-century Percy Folio manuscript. This volume, now London, British Library, MS Additional 27879, is a collection of ballads and romances, many originating (it seems) in the late Middle Ages, albeit heavily revised by a seventeenth-century learned (and, probably, royalist) antiquarian (Donatelli 1993). The new edition superseded that of the manuscript's eponymous first editor, Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811), who a century earlier had included much of its contents in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765).

The story of how Percy discovered the manuscript that now bears his name has often been told as a fine example of Romantic recuperation. While a young parson, on a visit to his native county of Shropshire, at the house of his friend Humphrey Pitt of Shifnal, probably in 1753, Percy famously retrieved a tattered ledger-like book 'lying dirty on the floor, under a bureau in the parlour . . . being used by the maids to light the fire' (Hales and Furnivall 1867–8: vol. I, lxiv). Percy reported Pitt's belief that the copyist of the manuscript was Thomas Blount (1618–79), the Worcestershire antiquary and lexicographer, from whose library the book was purchased, but this ascription has been challenged as circumstantial (Donatelli 1993, though see Gregory 2006). Whoever copied it, the manuscript was to become the basis – although with much extra matter – of the collection Percy published a decade later: the *Reliques*.

Percy's *Reliques*, which first appeared under the well-known Dodsley imprint, was one of the most influential publications of its day, rapidly becoming an eighteenth-century bestseller and 'a seminal work of English Romanticism' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, henceforth ODNB). It was much praised by William Wordsworth in 1815 and survived at least in selection format until late in the nineteenth century; a 'Boy's

Percy', for instance, appeared after Hales and Furnivall's edition, preferring to draw directly on the *Reliques* (Lanier 1883). A first print run of some 1,500 copies of the *Reliques* was almost sold out within six months of publication, responding to the taste for vernacular antiquarianism that contemporaries had also recently acclaimed in James Macpherson's 'Ossianic' *Fingal* (1762) (the latter albeit with a slightly distinct 'Celtic' – as opposed to Percy's 'Gothic' – flavour).<sup>1</sup>

Percy had by the time of the *Reliques*' publication already achieved a degree of recognition in literary circles. He had produced editions-cum-translations of fashionable chinoiserie, alongside some original poetry and a version of the *Song of Songs*; and, in 1763, he had demonstrated his antiquarian interests in the ancient North with the publication of *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, in which he had been assisted by the distinguished philologist Edward Lye (1694–1767).<sup>2</sup> Percy had also networked furiously, attracting the patronage of the duke of Northumberland – whose chaplain and secretary he became in 1765, and with whom he liked (they shared the same surname) to claim kinship, albeit distant – and becoming friendly with such figures as the poet William Shenstone (who advised him on the contents of the *Reliques*), Samuel Johnson, and the philosopher and historian David Hume. But the *Reliques* were and remained Percy's

<sup>1</sup> The relationship of Percy's *Reliques* to Macpherson's *Fingal* demands more space than is available here; for a discussion, see Dane and Djananova 2005: 80–2 and references there cited. The title pages and frontispieces for both books were designed by the same man, the well-known book-engraver and founding member of the Royal Academy, Samuel Wale (1721–86). Although there are similarities – *putti*, 'signifying whatever it is putti signify' (Dane and Djananova 2005: 82), appear in both – there are some subtle distinctions, emphasised *inter alia* by the illustrative material. The frontispiece for *Fingal* sets the poem within classical antiquity, with a suitably robed and 'Homerically blind bard' (Dane and Djananova 2005: 80). By contrast, that for the *Reliques*, in vol. III, is distinguished by a gothic spire and a galloping horseman in the distance, and in the foreground a group of figures in quasi-medieval dress, including two knights in armour, listening appreciatively to a harpist in a cloak. Not too much perhaps should be made of the distinction between these two images (Dane and Djananova carefully qualify their argument), but the contrast seems nevertheless worth noting. Wale was well-known for his illustrations of historical themes, including *Robert Kett, under the Oak of Reformation at his Great Camp on Mousehold Heath, Norwich, receives the Earl of Warwick's Herald* (c. 1746). This oil painting, now in the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell, is one of the most famous representations of Kett's rebellion of 1549 (see Chapter 4 below). The painting represents the rebellion as an example of chaotic misrule. A portly Kett, pictured wearing a feathered head-dress, sits on a makeshift podium surrounded by his troops and a soberly dressed adviser, while a youth, deploying a traditional Tudor insult, bares his bottom to a herald in a tabard. In an echo of the *Reliques* illustration, Norwich Cathedral looms in the background. The image of a world turned upside down is vaguely comic, in line with other sceptical eighteenth-century interpretations of the rebellion that viewed it through the lens of the seventeenth-century civil wars. Modern scholarship is clear that Kett's rebellion was a revolt of a desperate populace against oppressive elites (see e.g. Wood 2007).

<sup>2</sup> 'Runic' – sometimes 'runick' – was at the time a broadly cultural reference to anything Germanic rather than to a particular writing-system.

best-known work, even though he continued to publish other works into the 1770s. His literary activity only slackened off when he started to achieve significant ecclesiastical preferment, first as dean of Carlisle (1778) and finally as bishop of Dromore in Ireland (1782). These church appointments eventually distracted him from literary pursuits, and caused him to focus on his increasingly demanding pastoral duties.

The cultural impact of the *Reliques* was profound, but the collection was not received uncritically. The most trenchant near-contemporary attack on ‘the right reverend editor of that admired and celebrated work’ (Ritson 1783: x) came from another, younger antiquary, Joseph Ritson (1752–1803). Ritson, whose concerns with accuracy and authenticity made him a member of a much tougher school of textual criticism (to which we will return at the end of this book), summed up his view of the *Reliques* in an excoriating footnote:

That the above work [i.e. the *Reliques*] is beautiful, elegant, and ingenious, it would be ridiculous to deny; but they who look into it to be acquainted with the state of ancient poetry, will be miserably disappointed or fatally misled. Forgery and imposition of every kind, ought to be universally execrated, and never more than when they are employed by persons high in rank or character, and those very circumstances are made use of to sanctify the deceit. (Ritson 1783: x)

Although Ritson’s views, because expressed (as was his custom) so intemperately, were generally considered out of order by contemporaries, it is hard not to agree with his verdict that Percy took a strongly interventionist approach to his sources in a way that informed editors of the period – such as the great Richard Bentley, whom we will also encounter in the last chapter of this book – would undoubtedly have regarded as ‘polluted with . . . monstrous Faults’ (Bentley 1732: sig. a.2r). And Hales and Furnivall, a century later, largely agreed with the substance of Ritson’s views, while more generously acknowledging Percy’s achievement as a significant Romantic precursor: ‘He led the van of the army that Wordsworth afterwards commanded, and which has won us back to nature and truth’ (1867–8: xx).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ritson was in addition profoundly suspicious of Percy’s account of how the latter found the manuscript, ‘roaring away’ his views on its being a fake until the end of his life (see Donatelli 1993: 114 and references there cited). For Ritson’s turbulent career, which culminated in confinement to an asylum for the insane in Hoxton, see in the first instance ODNB; see also, for an insightful if brief discussion of his impact on Langland studies in particular, Warner 2014: 6–11, who identifies a characteristic *mal d’archive* that – disconcertingly – has regularly afflicted textual critics. The only contemporary willing publicly to defend Ritson seems, entirely unsurprisingly, to have been the

But it is important to recall two points. First, there is good evidence that Percy was quite aware of those other, more ‘correct’ trends in editorial practice. This awareness is demonstrated rather well by his personal response to the work of his friend Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, whose *Ancient Scottish Poetry*, which presented an avowedly up-to-date version of the well-known sixteenth-century Bannatyne manuscript (now Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates’ 1.1.6), appeared in 1770. Percy had reason to be grateful to Hailes, who had helped him in the preparation of the *Reliques* (Groom 1999: 208), and of course – given that Percy, unlike Ritson, subscribed to contemporary notions of decorum – nothing critical would be said in public; nor did Percy reproach Hailes personally concerning what he referred to, in a letter to Hailes dated 23 August 1772, as his ‘valuable Collection’ (Falconer 1954: 121). Hailes indeed made some definite claims about the accuracy of his work in its preface: ‘The reader will find the language, versification, and spelling, in the same state as they were in 1568’ (Hailes 1770: xx) (see further Chapter 6 below).

However, Percy’s own copy of Hailes’s *Ancient Scottish Poetry*, with annotations by Percy himself undertaken with direct reference to the manuscript sources, survives in Edinburgh’s National Library of Scotland (Ry.IV.f.4), and suggests that his real views were rather different. Percy managed himself to borrow the Bannatyne manuscript for a full two years for his projected comprehensive collection, *Ancient English and Scottish Poems*. This work he never completed (Ogburn 1936), presumably because of the pressure of his ecclesiastical duties, but he did use his access to the manuscript to thorough effect for a critical analysis of Hailes’s work. Percy’s extensive collations, covering pretty well the entire text of Hailes’s volume, demonstrate that Hailes had difficulties throughout with his understanding of Older Scots, replacing *brycht* with *bright*, *yit* with *yet* and so on (see further Falconer 1954: 161–8). It is clear from his collations that Percy had a definite view about correctness in editing. Hailes thought the same; it was just that he seems not to have been very good at what, in his introduction, he says he had set out to do.<sup>4</sup>

genial Walter Scott, despite Ritson’s having behaved in such a personally offensive way to Scott’s wife that she threatened to have him thrown out of a window.

<sup>4</sup> See further Chapter 6, notably for Walter Scott’s views on Hailes’s work. Percy’s notes in his copy of Hailes’s edition are pretty comprehensive, and systematically laid out. On the inside front cover he notes that certain abbreviations are ‘universally neglected by the Editor of this book’; he observes, as Walter Scott was later to do, Hailes’s mistaken reference to ‘Ballantine’ as the scribe, with the marginal note on p. v reading ‘Bannatyne [*sic*] MS ubique’; and later on the same page he underlines ‘fairly’ (in ‘fairly copied’) and in the margin writes ‘See the proofs in the follow<sup>g</sup> Pages’. Percy is known to have borrowed the Bannatyne manuscript between June 1773 and July 1775, having added

Secondly, Nick Groom has pointed out that, in the published form of the *Reliques*, Percy had been ‘pulled in opposite directions: towards scholarly precision by his antiquarian associates, and towards polite, elegant revision (and marketability)’ by other poets such as Shenstone, and by his publishers, the Dodsleys (Groom 1999: 9). Although the seriousness with which he engaged with the Percy Folio manuscript cannot be in doubt – Percy’s numerous annotations of the manuscript, offering interpretative glosses and small factual notes, attest to his thorough approach even if they might nowadays be regarded as vandalism – it seems from the evidence of his behaviour in the published *Reliques* that ‘polite, elegant revision’ was the stronger impulse when Percy moved to publication.

To exemplify Percy’s approach, we might compare the manuscript version of the rather gory ballad *Old Robin of Portingale* with the version that appears in the *Reliques*:

**Text (P.1): London, British Library, MS Additional 27879 (Percy Folio), p. 90**

[The emboldened **God** signifies an engrossed word in the original.]

**God** let neuer soe old a man  
 Marry soe yonge a wiffe  
 as did old Robin of portingale  
 he may rue all the dayes of his liffe  
 ffor the Maiors daughter of Lin god wott  
 he chose her to his wife  
 & thought to haue liued in quietnesse  
 w<sup>th</sup> her all the dayes of his liffe  
 they had not in their wed bed laid  
 scarcely were both in sleepe  
 but vpp shee rose & forth shee goes  
 to S<sup>r</sup> Gyles & fast can weepe  
 saies sleepe yo<sup>u</sup> wake yo<sup>u</sup> faire S<sup>r</sup> Gyles

to that volume a characteristic emendation, on p. 58 of the so-called ‘Draft MS’ section. It has also been suggested that he added a title at the top of folio 1r in the ‘Main MS’ section, reading ‘Ane most Godlie, mirrie and lustie rapsodie maide be sundrie learned Scots poets and written be George Bannatyne in the tyme of his youth’, although the handwriting – if his – seems to me to be much more elaborate in appearance than his customary usage (but see Fox and Ringler 1980: xvi–xvii). He also consulted another major sixteenth-century Older Scots poetic miscellany, the Maitland Folio manuscript (Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2553), supplying from the latter numerous variant readings – often written in red ink – and sometimes complete stanzas. Percy’s activity as a reader can be seen in many of the books that survive from his extensive library, much of which is now housed in the library of Queen’s University Belfast; Percy’s copy of *Piers Plowman*, in the Queen’s collection, will be discussed in Chapter 4 below.

or be not yo<sup>u</sup> w<sup>th</sup>in  
 but I am waking sweete he said  
 Lady what is yo<sup>ur</sup> will  
 I haue vnbethought me of a wile  
 how my wed Lord we shall spill  
 24 knights she sayes  
 y<sup>f</sup> dwells about this towne  
 eene 24 of my Next Cozens  
 will helpe to dinge him downe

**Text (P.2): Percy, *Reliques* (1765: vol. III, 48–9)**

L ET neuer again soe old a man  
 Marrye soe yonge a wife,  
 As did old ‘sir’ Robin of Portingale;  
 Who may rue all the dayes of his life.

For the mayors daughter of Lin, god wott, 5  
 He chose her to his wife,  
 And thought with her to have lived in love,  
 But they fell to hate and strife.

They scarce were in their wed-bed laid,  
 And scarce was he asleepe, 10  
 But upp she rose, and forth shee goes;  
 To the steward, and gan to weepe.

Sleepe you, wake you, faire sir Gyles?  
 Or be you not withinn?  
 Sleepe you, wake you, faire sir Gyles? 15  
 Arise and let me inn.

O, I am waking, sweete, he said,  
 Sweete ladye, what is your wille?  
 I have bethought me of a wyle  
 my wed-lord weell spille. 20

Twenty-four good knights, she sayes,  
 That dwell about this towne,  
 Even twenty-four of my near cozens,  
 Shall helpe to ding him downe.

It is clear from this comparison that – although obviously in a less extreme form than his contemporary, Macpherson, who is generally accepted to have crossed the boundary from literary engagement with past texts to outright forgery – Percy seems to have seen his role in the *Reliques* as primarily to provide a creative response to the past rather than act as its humble conduit.

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Thus, in addition to adding numerous additional poems to those he had inherited from the Folio manuscript, Percy emended freely those texts he had found there. We might compare the opening lines of Texts (P.1) and (P.2):

## (P.1):

**God** let neuer soe old a man  
 Marry soe yonge a wiffe  
 as did old Robin of portingale  
 he may rue all the dayes of his liffe

## (P.2):

**L** ET neuer again soe old a man  
 Marrye soe yonge a wife,  
 As did old 'sir' Robin of Portingale;  
 Who may rue all the dayes of his life.

The engrossed **God** in (P.1) has disappeared in (P.2), replaced by an inserted (and delayed) *again*, and Percy has rethought the structure of the last line as a relative clause, loosely linked to those preceding in his exemplar and flagged by an imposed initial *Who*.

An even more radical revision takes place later in the passage, where (P.1) reads as follows:

they had not in their wed bed laid  
 scarcely were both in sleepe  
 but ypp shee rose & forth shee goes  
 to S<sup>r</sup> Gyles & fast can weepe  
 saies sleepe yo<sup>u</sup> wake yo<sup>u</sup> faire S<sup>r</sup> Gyles  
 or be not yo<sup>u</sup> w<sup>th</sup>in  
 but I am waking sweete he said  
 Lady what is yo<sup>ur</sup> will  
 I haue vnbethought me of a wile  
 how my wed Lord we shall spill

We might compare (P.2):

They scarce were in their wed-bed laid, And scarce was he asleepe, But upp she rose, and forth shee goes; To the steward, and gan to weepe.	10
Sleepe you, wake you, faire sir Gyles? Or be you not withinn? Sleepe you, wake you, faire sir Gyles? Arise and let me inn.	15

O, I am waking, sweete, he said,  
 Sweete ladye, what is your wille?  
 I have bethought me of a wyle  
 How my wed-lord weell spille.

Comparison of these passages shows that Percy has made numerous revisions to tidy up perceived infelicities in his original, making the poem in his own terms more forceful and logical. Emphasising and clarifying the social transgressiveness of the narrative, he replaces in line 12 the first reference to *S' Gyles* with *the steward*. The structure *fast can weepe* in the original, with the verb phrase preceded by the adverb *fast*, is replaced by the poetically weaker (but more conventionally ballad-like) syntax of the phrase *gan to weepe*, introducing the Middle English auxiliary *gan* that is so common in medieval verse-romances, such as those in the well-known Auchinleck manuscript (now Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1). Percy clearly regards the cohesive verb *saies* in line 13 as unnecessary, but then introduces, to remedy a perceived lack of continuity in the action, an invented pair of lines (15–16): a species of parallelism that he clearly likes (we might note also the repetition of *scarce* in lines 9–10). The repetition of *Sweete* in line 18 is perhaps a vague echo of a common Chaucerian usage – Thopas is described as *sweete as is the brembul flour* (Benson 1987: 213, line 746) – while *vbethought* is replaced by the less striking *bethought*; according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED), the former verb, while fairly common in Middle English, was restricted to non-standard dialects by Percy's time, as opposed to the much more commonplace latter form.<sup>5</sup> And *we shall spill* in the manuscript is replaced by the less euphonious *weell spille*, replacing *shall* – the auxiliary 'of obligation', as Percy would have perceived it – with volitional [*wi*ll]; the replacement emphasises the status of the wife and steward as (bad) moral actors, fully responsible for their lustful behaviour.

Not only does the anthology demonstrate how texts can be reordered in terms of contents ('substantively') to reflect changes in taste, but it also shows how even the smallest modifications in the text as presented – those features traditionally dismissed by textual editors as 'accidentals' – are vectors of meaning, indicating shifts in socio-cultural function. Percy's text, for instance, deploys the enhanced roman typeface of its day rather than the blackletter still favoured by several contemporaries for the reproduction of medieval vernacular writing; his usage therefore insists on the

<sup>5</sup> The OED has a useful citation, for instance, of a 'provincial' expression, roughly contemporary with Percy, recorded in William Marshall's *Rural Economy of Yorkshire* (1788): *I unbethought myself on't*.



contemporary cultural currency of his verse. It is a noticeable feature of Hales and Furnivall's much more 'professional' edition a century later that blackletter reappeared on their title page, a practice sustained well past the Victorian period, as an antiquarian claim of authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, throughout the *Reliques* – whether Percy's own responsibility or that of his printer – diacritics (*cozèns*) and marks of punctuation have been introduced, not only to assist readers in their appreciation of the text's structure but also to provide a set of rhetorical guidelines, with differentiated pauses, for those who might wish to perform the text aloud, as part of contemporary 'sociable reading'.

I have chosen Thomas Percy's *Reliques* as my starting-point for a number of reasons, not least because we have so much evidence for Percy's own – as well as his printer's – engagement with his exemplars. But the key reason for choosing him is that the *Reliques* exemplifies so many of the themes of this book.

What forms do medieval English and Scots texts take when they are received in later discourses? How far does such textual reworking reflect cultural and social changes? As just illustrated from Thomas Percy's *Reliques*, this book argues that every aspect of a given physical manifestation of a text is a vector of meaning. Such features of 'expressive form' (Bell 2002: 632) as spelling, script and font, and punctuation – often neglected in critical engagement with past texts – relate closely, it is argued, to dynamic, shifting socio-cultural processes, imperatives and functions as those texts are transmitted across time and space. Drawing on Gérard Genette's now well-known insight that a text 'is rarely presented in an unadorned state' (1997: 1), the book's framing argument is that such delicate textual traces are responses to dynamically shifting socio-cultural functions. All such 'written-language' features can be said, in Mark Sebba's helpful formulation, to 'function as markers of difference and belonging, and be involved in the creation of identities at different levels of social

<sup>6</sup> We might compare J. R. R. Tolkien's EETS diplomatic edition (1962) of *Ancrene Wisse*, where the title in archaic blackletter is deployed prominently both on the title page and on the front cover: a relic of EETS's origins in the middle of the nineteenth century – origins in which Furnivall had of course played a key role. By contrast, Eric Dobson's sister-edition of *Ancrene Riwele* (1972), also for EETS and from exactly a decade later, presents the title of the work in a modern roman typeface: a discreet acknowledgment of socio-cultural progress during the intervening years. Blackletter typefaces are generally referred to by modern printers as 'gothic'; this term, however, has been avoided in this book since in the eighteenth century 'gothic' – or more correctly 'Gothick' or 'Gothish' – referred to fonts used for printing early Germanic languages, as was the case in Ruddiman's Glossary to his edition of Douglas's *Eneados* (see Chapter 5 below). See further Echard 2008: 25 and 59; see also Dane and Djananova 2005: 90 and references there cited.

organisation' (2009: 36); books are, after all, 'ineluctably, social products' (McKenzie 2002: 553). Examination of how such 'adornments' evolve, whether gradually or in saltatory fashion in relation to moments of greater or lesser social rupture, is the aim of this study. It also addresses an important challenge presented by John Hines and others: 'we should . . . not innocently regard the historical document as merely a window through which we gain an image of past reality, but rather as part of that reality itself' (Hines 2004: 32 and references there cited).

The book contributes to the history of textual functions – and, by extension, of that discipline variously known as textual criticism or textual editing – during crucial periods of British cultural formation, e.g. Anglo-Saxon and later medieval England, the reformation and the renaissance, the civil wars, Jacobitism, the enlightenment, Romanticism: simple labels that disguise, as is well known, huge complexity. The texts examined, ranging from *Beowulf* through the *Canterbury Tales* to Gavin Douglas's translation of the *Æneid* and the sixteenth-century Bannatyne miscellany, all have significant afterlives, being chosen for their multiple recuperations and their cultural impact. Several of these recuperations have been explored individually in earlier research, but this book brings such discussions together within an overall frame that goes beyond traditional approaches to 'medievalism'. It does so using the approach known as *historical pragmatics*. It is to that approach that we will now turn.