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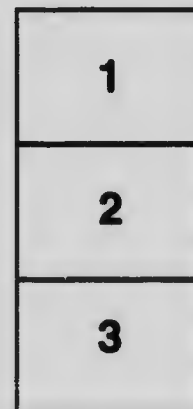
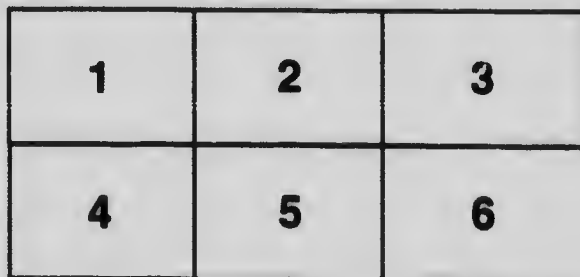
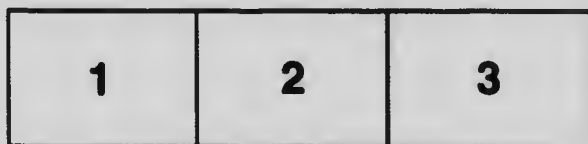
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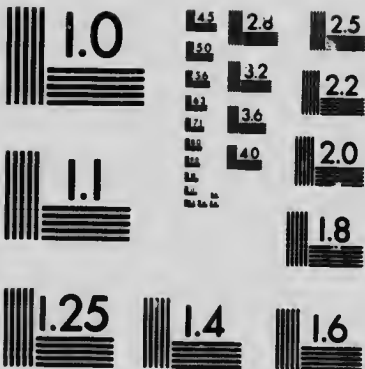
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Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry

By W. H. CLAWSON



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PERCY'S RELIQUES OF ANCIENT ENGLISH POETRY.

BY W. H. CLAWSON.

The recent publication by Professor Hecht of Basel of the correspondence between Thomas Percy and William Shenstone from the Percy papers in the British Museum* gives such interesting information concerning the genesis and development of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* as to make timely view of the origin, the structure, and the significance of that famous book.

Like most great works Percy's *Reliques* was by no means the first of its kind, but a successful attempt, at a favorable moment, to do what others had previously tried. Three ballad collections for educated readers had been published in Great Britain during the second quarter of the eighteenth century†; but none of these had been very complete or had attracted any general attention. Percy's greater success was due in part to the growing enthusiasm for the remote and the primitive, which, by way of reaction from pseudo-classical artificiality, began to permeate English letters in the middle of the eighteenth century. This change is illustrated by a passage in Gray's *Progress of Poesy*, published in 1757, in which this leading poet of a classical age admits the rude verses of the Laplanders and the South American Indians to a place in the history of poetry.

The study of such early literature received an immense impetus in 1760 from the publication by James Macpherson of the Ossian fragments. The controversy which followed, stimulated the publication of translations from the Norse and the Welsh,‡ the more diligent study of early English literature, and the search for ancient manuscripts and traditional ballads. In the year 1765, in the height of this antiquarian enthusiasm, appeared the *Reliques of*

**Thomas Percy and William Shenstone. Ein Briefwechsel aus der Entstehungszeit der Reliques of Ancient English Poetry.* (Quellen und Forschungen, CIII, Frankfurt, 1909.)

†A Collection of Old Ballads, corrected from the best and most ancient copies extant. London, 1723, 1725. Allan Ramsay: *The Tea-Table Miscellany*. Edinburgh, 1724, 1727. W. Thomson: *Orpheus Caledonius, or a Collection of the best Scotch Songs*. London, 1725.

‡Gray: *The Descent of Odin and The Fatal Sisters*, translated 1761, published 1768.

Percy: *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, (1763).

Evan Evans: *Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh* (1764).

Ancient English Poetry. A revelation of the treasures of passionate feeling and expression hitherto obscured in popular tradition, the book came at exactly the right moment. Its success and its influence were immediate and permanent.

This success was also due to the unusual qualifications of the editor. Thomas Percy,* born of middle class parents at Bridgenorth in Shropshire in 1729, and educated at the town grammar school and at Christ Church, Oxford, took his M.A. in 1753, entered the Church of England ministry, and was presented by his college to the living of Easton Maudit in Northamptonshire.* Here in 1759 he brought his bride, Anne Gutteridge, daughter of a neighboring squire; here his six children were born; and here he lived the refined, leisurely life of a beneficed clergyman in the eighteenth century, so happily reflected at a later period in the pages of Jane Austen. Such an education and such surroundings exactly suited Percy's tastes, which were antiquarian and literary. Pride in his supposed descent from the storied Percies of Northumberland had directed his attention to the mediæval past, and especially to those popular ballads which recorded the deeds of his ancestors. The fortunate discovery, at the country-house of a Shropshire friend, of a seventeenth century manuscript collection of mediæval songs, ballads, and romances, which the maids were using to light fires, had given him an acquaintance, unique in his day, with the finest effusions of the popular muse. Moreover his literary ambitions, facile pen, assimilative and sympathetic power of appreciating and reflecting what he read, delicate but somewhat narrow literary judgment, and slender but genuine poetic talent made him capable of presenting this popular material in a form which would arrest public attention.

With these qualifications, Percy had the good fortune to belong to a literary circle which admired early poetry and stimulated him to undertake publication. His friend, Dr. Johnson, in spite of an occasional gibe, liked the ballads, and urged him to print his old manuscript. Oliver Goldsmith, who met Percy in 1759, doubtless told him how he had been lulled asleep as a child by "Johnny Armstrong" and "Barbara Allan's Cruelty," and certainly vied with Percy in ballad imitation. David Garrick put at

*Pickford: *Life of Thomas Percy*, prefixed to Hales and Furnivall's Ed. of *Percy Folio*. London, 1867.

Gaussen: *Percy, Prelate and Poet*. London, 1908.

Percy's disposal his collection of old plays, one source of the folk-songs that illustrate Shakespeare. The best English scholars supplied manuscripts and annotations. But of all Percy's advisers and helpers the most important was the man referred to in Percy's preface as "the elegant Mr. Shenstone."

William Shenstone, the author of *The Schoolmistress*, a mock-heroic description of village life in the Spenserian stanza, was born at the Leasowes, an estate in Worcestershire, in 1714. After an Oxford education he returned to the Leasowes, where he passed his time in landscape gardening and in composing poetry of a studied grace and simplicity, not uninfluenced by Spencer and the popular ballads. This elegant forerunner of the romantic passion for landscape and folk-poetry made Percy's acquaintance shortly after the latter settled at Easton Maudit, and at once became interested in the young clergyman and his old manuscript. The correspondence that sprang up between them on this and kindred literary topics was preserved by Percy and came with his other papers to the British Museum. Its publication by Professor Hecht has made it evident that Shenstone was the suggester of the plan of the *Reliques* and practically the collaborator of Percy in the greater part of the work. It reveals Percy as an enthusiastic student of early poetry in various literatures, and Shenstone both as an admirer of this poetry and a prudent mentor, warning Percy not to let his antiquarianism smother his literary attractiveness.

At the very beginning of the correspondence, Percy, writing from London, Nov. 24, 1757, mentions his ballad manuscript: "When I had the pleasure of seeing you last, you were so good as to read me an old Scotch song intitled Gil Morris. I am possessed of a very curious old MS. collection of ancient ballads, many of which I believe were never printed: among the rest is a copy of your song under the title of Child Maurice: if you would do me the favour to lend me your song to collate with my MS. I would punctually and carefully return it. Mr. Johnson has seen my MS. and has a desire to have it printed. It contains many old romantic and historical ballads: Upon King Arthur and the Knights of his Round Table, Merlin, etc., etc., etc."

Shenstone replies from The Leasowes, Jan. 4, 1758: "I have enclosed the ballad of Gill Morrice for your perusal . . . You pique my curiosity extremely by the mention of that ancient manuscript, as there is nothing gives me greater pleasure than the

simplicity of style and sentiment that is observable in old English ballads. If aught could add to that pleasure, it would be an opportunity of perusing them in your company at the Leasowes, and pray do not think of publishing them until you have given me that opportunity."

In his next letter, Jan. 9, Percy encloses a copy of another ballad from his MS. and promises to lay the whole collection before his friend at the earliest possible opportunity. So the correspondence goes on for more than two years, Percy submitting further extracts from his folio, outlining his literary plans, asking advice and co-operation, and discussing current books, common friends, and household affairs. The older man replies with courtly compliments, complaints of ill health and low spirits, and shrewd literary counsel.

Throughout the correspondence one is impressed by Percy's versatility and the breadth of his interests. His letters pulse with the new love of remote and unsophisticated literature. Now he is translating a Spanish ballad, now discussing Collins' *Persian Eclogues*, now preparing an English version of a Chinese tale, now busy with a collection of translations from the Old Norse, now criticizing Macpherson's translations of the Ossianic poems, now discussing the literary merit of a Welsh ode. A letter to Evan Evans, translator of these Welsh odes which is quoted by Professor Hecht in his introduction, shows that Percy was forming schemes of compilation even as broad as those of his more philosophic German successor, Herder. He proposes a work called "Specimens of the ancient poetry of different nations," to include translations from Erse, Norse, Chinese, Arabic, Hebrew, East-Indian, Peruvian, Lapland, Greenland, and Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Shenstone's attitude to this antiquarian enthusiasm is that of the literary man, insisting upon the critical as at least of equal weight with the scholarly estimate. "Pardon me if I propose one question to you," he writes (Feb. 15, 1760): "Are you never prejudiced by the air of learning, the obscurity, the rarity, and perhaps the difficulty of your work, to imagine something in it more extraordinary than the public will perhaps discover? One is many times led by the foresaid circumstances to incur the blunder of a mole and to fancy one's self deep when one is extremely near the surface." This keen observation, which anticipates a well-known remark of Matthew Arnold, on the tendency

of scholarship to over-value its material,* shows that Percy was fortunate in having such a clear-sighted friend at his elbow. Without Shenstone's counsel the *Reliques* might have been a mere monument of scholarship; with his assistance it became also a piece of literature.

It was probably during a visit of Percy and his wife to the Leasowes in August or September, 1760, that the plan for a collection of English popular poetry based on the Folio manuscript was definitely arranged between Percy and Shenstone. For over two years their letters had dealt with other topics; immediately thereafter they begin to discuss the details of the proposed anthology; and from then to the end of the correspondence scarcely a letter is without some specific reference to the book as actually progressing. There are difficulties in procuring a publisher (Nov. 27, 1760), but Dodsley finally undertakes the work (May 22, 1761). Percy mentions the sources from which he is drawing his material—black letter ballads in Cambridge and London, orally transmitted ballads from correspondents in Scotland, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, and Wales (July 19, 1761). Later we have discussions of the arrangement of type and wood-cuts (Oct., 1761), references to the dispatch of copy (Feb. 22, 1762) and to the revising of proof (June 17, 1762).

Shenstone's advice to Percy on the conduct of the work may be grouped under the heads of selection, arrangement, handling of the text, and annotation. Regarding selection his greatest concern is lest the book should be too long. "I hope . . . that the prodigious pains Mr. Percy proposes to take in this affair will be employed rather to fill a moderate collection with the best readings of good ballads than to swell such collection to any very great extent" (April, 1761). The book is on no account to exceed three volumes, and two would be preferable (Oct. 1, 1760). Shenstone fears that a longer collection would include too many pieces of purely scholarly interest, "and my only fear has been that mere antiquity should sometimes impose upon you in the garb of merit" (Oct., 1761). He returns again and again to this point: "You will think it proper to insert something that comprises the actions of this great Champion Guy, as well as those of King Arthur; and yet there is evidently not a single particle of poetical merit in either of the ballads. Once for all, it is extremely certain that

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an overproduction of this kind of ballast will sink your vessel to the bottom of the sea. Therefore be on your guard in time!" (May 16, 1762.)

As to arrangement, Percy and Shenstone, with the concurrence of Johnson, seem to have agreed from the first that the selections must not be disposed according to any rigid classification, but in such manner as to sustain the attention of the general reader. Shenstone writes (Oct. 1, 1760), "as to placing them, I would not have the long ones ever follow one another, unless there happen to be some very particular reason for their so doing. My motive is, that any that think them dull should esteem (them) doubly so on account of their length, and then—you know the consequence." And on May 22, 1761, Percy, having consulted with Johnson, writes from London: "My collection shall be promiscuous, yet so distributed that the pieces shall, if possible, illustrate each other; I don't mean by throwing those of the same subject together, under the several heads of Tragical, Comical, etc., but only when any little stroke in one serves to explain an obscurity in another. Where nothing of this kind offers, I shall distribute them so as to prevent the reader from being tired; I shall not easily suffer two long ditties to come together, nor permit a long series of love songs to remain undivided."

Later, when Percy suggested a chronological arrangement, Shenstone objected that this might defeat their purpose of making the book entertaining. "You would incur the danger of throwing too many ballads together that were irregular in point of metre, or subobscure in point of language; and this, at the beginning of your work, might perhaps be liable to give disgust." He even proposed "to defer the publication of such old pieces as have rather more merit in the light of curiosity than poetry (such as the tragic one of 'the Fight at Otterburne,' and the comic one of 'John the Reeve') until you have experienced the public's reception of the two First Volumes" (Oct., 1761). This excessive deference to the critical elegance of the age Shenstone was later induced to modify; and on Feb. 3, 1762, he suggested an ingenious adaptation of the chronological order: "What if you proceed from old to newer ballads in every distinct volume, supposing your improved copies to appear towards the close, and there be first referred to the original copies? This would at least prevent the first volume from being too much loaded with obsolete pieces, which were not

agreeable to the general taste. And so make first, second, and third series in every distinct volume."

It is extremely interesting to note that this was the order actually adopted. In arrangement as well as in selection the *Reliques* are in close conformity with Shenstone's advice. They comprise poems not limited to one type, for example, the popular ballad, but chosen from various styles to illustrate in a general way the earlier English poetry, particularly that of a traditional and popular cast. The poems are disposed in three volumes, each divided into three books, representing loosely the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries respectively, and unified also to a certain extent by their subject matter, but freely varied by change of theme and by the interpolation among the ruder pieces of lyrics of a more polished character.

Concerning the text and annotations, Shenstone's only fear was lest the edition should be overweighted with minute scholarship. So long as there was no deliberate falsification he cared nothing for an accurate text: "I believe I shall never make any objection to such improvements as you bestow upon them, unless you were plainly to contradict antiquity, which I am pretty sure will never be the case. As to alterations of a word or two, I do not esteem it a point of conscience to particularize them on this occasion. Perhaps, where a whole line or more is altered, it may be proper enough to give some intimation of it. The italic type may answer this purpose, if you do not employ it on other occasions. It will have the appearance of a modern toe or finger, which is allowably added to the best old statues: and I think I should always let the public imagine that they are owing to gaps rather than to faulty passages." (Oct. 1, 1760.)

In this respect also Percy followed Shenstone's advice, and has in consequence met severe censure, not all of it deserved.* From the modern scholar's point of view it was undoubtedly his duty to print his entire manuscript without alteration. Percy, however, was not a modern scholar but an eighteenth century man of letters, attempting to teach a public nourished on Pope and Johnson to enjoy the ballads of a rude age. In order to get readers he believed it essential to present a text free from obviously corrupt

*See Joseph Ritson's Preface to his *English Songs* (1783), *Ancient Songs* (1790) *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (1803); and Hales and Furnivall, *The Percy Folio M.S.*, introduction and notes, *passim*.

readings, from harsh metre and rhyme, from hopeless lapses from sense, dignity, and decorum. He had no confidence in the illiterate reciters and transcribers who had handed down the text to him; and he had a genuine instinct for the ballad style. Accordingly he altered freely, changing words, lines, and whole stanzas and supplying gaps in the manuscript by passages of his own composition, sometimes of considerable length. These changes and additions he did not indicate in detail; for it was necessary to guard the text from multiplied foot-notes, variant readings, and other apparatus repellent to the average reader. But wherever a ballad was altered he stated the fact in a general way in the introduction. His treatment of the text, therefore, was not only necessary to his purpose but also free from deception. Moreover it is often both clever and true to ballad style. His restoration of the corrupt and defective opening of *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* is extremely neat; and his enrichment of the original Heir of Linne ballad by the incident of the running noose, the bursting ceiling, and the discovery of the gold by means of the attempted suicide is as clever a fusion of two ballads as any ancient minstrel ever effected. But his changes are not always so happy, and when in *Sir Cauline* and *The Child of Elle* we note the sophistication and sentimentality of his additions we wish that he had printed the rugged original text with all its gaps and corruptions. Thus in attempting "to please both the judicious antiquary and the reader of taste," he sometimes ends by offending both. On the whole, however, his text must be justified as a suitable one for his time.

In the midst of further consultation over the proof-sheets of the forthcoming work, Shenstone, who had for some time been weak in health, was attacked by a fever and died at the Leasowes, after an illness of eleven days, February 11, 1763. His services to Percy had been great and fully worthy of the handsome acknowledgement which Percy was afterwards to accord him in his preface. He had given Percy material, counsel, and encouragement. Through his instrumentality Percy had obtained his Scotch correspondents, and through them some of the most famous ballads in his collection. From Shenstone he had received the idea of the arrangement of the book, and had been restrained from such excessive antiquarianism as would have destroyed its popularity. Above all, Shenstone, in spite of his concessions to the taste of the time.

had a genuine appreciation of the emotional sincerity and unconscious art of the old ballads and a real enthusiasm for their publication. "If I have any talent at conjecture," he had written, Nov. 10, 1760, "all people of taste throughout the Kingdom will rejoice to see a judicious, a correct and elegant collection of such pieces. For after all 'tis such pieces that contain the true chemical spirit or essence of poetry, a little of which properly mingled is sufficient to strengthen and keep alive very considerable quantities of the kind. 'Tis the voice of sentiment rather than the language of reflexion, adapted peculiarly to strike the passions, which is the only merit of poetry that has obtained my regard of late."

The man who joined such romantic appreciation to such critical keenness and warm friendship is certainly entitled to a share of the fame which is commonly assigned to Percy alone; and in paying this debt we cannot refrain from the pious wish that Shenstone might have lived to witness the fulfilment of his prophecy. For the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which appeared in February, 1765, two years after Shenstone's death, proved one of the chief sources of the triumph of romanticism. It evoked an admiration and imitation of ballads and popular poetry which swept through Europe, set antiquaries to work gathering up the last fragments of traditional song, and stirred men of letters to the cultivation of simplicity and of the mediæval past.

