David Matthews

*The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910.*


Reviewed by Julian Wasserman

Published 25.02.2003

Asked his identity, Beowulf responds with his ancestry: that he is the son of Ecgtheow. This quintessentially medieval moment in which Beowulf’s lineage and identity demonstrate a truth that is self-evident throughout the poem: nothing exists solely by itself; everything has an informing history or genealogy. Hrothgar is a descendant of Scyld Scaefing. Grendel is a descendant of Cain. Even the sword found at the bottom of the hellish mere has a history; its handle is engraved with the names of its maker and the person for whom it was made.

Given the importance of ancestry in everything from *Beowulf to Morte D’Arthur*, it is ironic that medievalists have by and large been unaware of the history of their disciplines. As David Matthews notes in the Introduction to *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910*, "Middle English Studies have shown little interest in its material history" (xv). By material history, Matthews explicitly means its texts of whose production we often know less about than the inscription on Beowulf’s magic sword. Part of the problem, as Matthews rightly points out, is that the “notion of authority [in texts] often has the effect of effacing the prior critical history” (xv) that the presence of an authoritative text or variorum implicitly corrects, replaces and hence obliterates from memory all previous (less perfect) editions. Again, as Matthews states, “Authority ceaselessly reinvents itself, but a condition of its doing so is a forgetting that there was any prior authority” (xvi).

Matthews sets out to remedy that “forgetting” with a readable and informative narrative of the history of the formation of Middle English, beginning with the publication of Percy’s *Reliques* in 1765 and ending roughly in 1910 with the death of Frederick Furnivall. It’s a remarkable tale and at times a cautionary one too, raising along the way such issues as the nature and politics of editing, the validity of historical periodization, the complex relationship between editor and text in regard to “the technology of self,” the conflicting needs of “the man of taste” and the scholar, and the marginalization of Medieval Studies -- to name just a few. In the end, *The Making of Middle English* is a tale of origins of the texts we’ve gratefully read, and what a long, strange trip it’s been. Beginning with the productions of lower middle class antiquarians writing for noble patronage with aspirations of writing themselves into the aristocracy, it progresses to the elite and “tightly controlled” Roxburghe Club’s limited and often unreadable volumes, “reserved for the aristocratic and gentlemanly few” to “the open, democratically minded format of EETS,
which aimed its books at an educated middle class,” and finally to the institutionalization of Middle English as a regular part of the university curriculum (xiv). The tale, then, is primarily one about the means of production of texts and of cultural capital. The lens through which we are led to view this history is a Marxist one, but it’s an appropriate one here, because this is in the end a tale of power, property, and class.

“Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before,” or so Mary Shelley tells us in the 1831 introduction of her own monstrous aggregate. Assuming that what went before was the actual manuscript, Matthews’ tale of our aggregate texts begins with Thomas Percy, nee Piercy, who changed his name and his texts in search of patronage from the powerful Percy family and nobility through fictional association. In so doing, he rewrote himself along with several of the ballads of the famous “Percy Manuscript.” Here begin in almost complete subjectivity the origins of what we often take to be the objective “science” of transcribing manuscripts into scholarly editions. According to Matthews, “The full ramifications of Percy’s name change and genealogy represent a classic wish-fulfillment fantasy of noble origins” (6). Other ramifications of Percy’s self-fashioning were the long-standing privileging of Romance (leaving non-romance works to be ignored for more than a century) and the creation of a somewhat doubtful but self-serving but nonetheless influential theory of “minstrelsy.” As Matthews demonstrates, by co-opting the act of editing as a way of remaking himself (and minstrel-like making over a good number of ballads as well), Percy set the model for years to come of the independent antiquarian scholar dependent on the finances and tastes of noble patrons. In the Percy model, the antiquarian became inextricably linked to -- in fact, inseparable from -- the text itself, developing his own authority and “cultural capital.” Indeed, as Matthews argues, “one of Percy’s major achievements in the Reliques was to historicize himself as a poet, rather than the texts of his poetry” (10). Thus Percy, suitably medievalized, rewrote many of the ballads, eliminating material that might offend aristocratic (a patron’s, specifically a Percy’s) tastes. Although Matthews does not make the connection, one might well think of the heyday of Robertsonian readings in this century, a critical technique wherein critics (including this reviewer) likewise became so historicized as to demonstrate the ability to write new exegesis rather than discover its medieval traces in a text. In the ensuing discussion of editing for gentlemanly tastes, there’s material for reader-response critics to ponder here as well. So, much of this, like all good history, is a mirror in which we can see our own follies practiced at a safe distance by others who have gone before us. Percy and genteel editors for the next century read medieval literature by wishing that it were something other than it was (“barbaric”). Supposedly of little if any literary value, the medieval text was for the Percyan amateur antiquarian a means of satisfying personal curiosity by discovering pictures and customs of a barbaric age long past and a means of radical self advancement.

Set against antiquarian Percy is the flamboyant Ritson, a personal favorite of this reviewer ever since coming across a contemporary lament that would make Ritson seem at home in any English department meeting of our own era: “[Percy’s] work has been attacked with the usual acrimony by Ritson; the editor
has been branded with ignorance, imposition, and every species of reproach which malignity could suggest; and every fault which learned petulance could discover, has been pointed out with a curious and offensive officiousness." Put in less sensational terms, Ritson's preoccupation with "accuracy" and fidelity to texts made him a frequent critic of Percy's lack of fidelity to the manuscript. Indeed, Ritson's "call for authenticity" has, as Matthews notes, made him in some minds a candidate as founding father of modern textual editing. Matthews, however, makes the case that Ritson, despite his radical politics, was really less an antithesis to Percyesque traditions of editing and was in practice rather conventional in his approach to texts. As Matthews points out, despite the legendary vituperativeness of Ritson's *ad hominem* exchanges with Percy (and most everyone else for that matter), Ritson's conflicts with Percy were "methodological rather than conceptual" (41) with Ritson having little "concept" of the "Middle Ages" as such and little interest in "periodizing" or philology (40-41). Ritson's railing was primarily directed against Percy's mistakes in transcription, rewritings and elevated concept of the minstrel. (Actually what Ritson seems to have begrudged Percy is his status as rockstar, as opposed to minstrel.) In contrast to Percy's "minstrel"-like duties to his patron, Ritson never sought patronage and never dedicated a volume to anyone. Yet like the object of his frequent scorn, Ritson's interest is not in interpretation or literary value but in text, actually transcription, albeit more accurate transcription than Percy. As Matthews amply demonstrates, what is absent in Ritson and in Percy is a clear sense of the "Middle Ages" as a distinct period as well as any sense of Middle English literature as "literature" -- that is, a source of anything other than historical data. By 1910, those twin senses are very much in place. Matthews' task is to document how those now self-evident concepts came into our consciousness.

The third face on this editorial Mount Rushmore belongs to none less than Sir Walter Scott whom Matthews links to the Percy school of editing by noting that "despite . . . ritual denials . . . , Scott's is a famous and well-documented case of literary self-fashioning" (56-57). Although Scott liked to proclaim that his social status was already fixed by the time he began writing, Scott's was a more subtle form of self fashioning, "a genealogical revision of himself" (65) by aggrandizing not himself but, rather, his forebears as great poets in the Percy school of minstrelsy. In fact, Scott's is a fascinating tale of "reverse colonization," of Scott's editorial border raids into the north of England in order to claim Scottish origins for a large part of what we now regard as the Middle English canon. Scott's editing is Percy's practice written large, on a national (Scottish) scale, with a "promotion of a modern chivalry as an ideology legitimating the practices of, initially, the aristocracy and, later, the newly emergent middle class" (57). Although influenced by Ritson's demand for accuracy in transcription, Scott, in his edition of *Sir Tristrem*, elevates the supposed author of the tale, Thomas of Ercedoun, to the Percyan status of minstrel. Here as elsewhere throughout this narrative, Matthews is especially good at exploring the complications and pursuant concessions that such ideological editing represents and requires. Matthews' remarks, here and in the chapter on Percy, are particularly perceptive on the necessity of foregrounding romance for an aristocratic audience in search of real-life pictures of medieval life. While romance above all else satisfies the requirements of aristocratic origins and its idealized pre-industrial hierarchy, the genre's myriad unrealistic details posed a grave

http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/03_01_was.html
theoretical problem for an approach that valued such writings only for their historical data; that is, its commitment to realism. Demonstrating the sort of mental gymnastics required for such an appropriation, Scott found such marvels to be subsequent corruptions of “Eastern” origin. Even the fact of these “Scots” materials not actually being in Scots was put to service as proof of the corruption that had let the “Eastern” unrealities into the once pure output of Thomas of Ercedoun. Scott's sheer willpower to wish a thing into something else may have been a marvelous asset for an author, but it was of dubious value to him as an editor. An interesting coda to the chapter on Scott, as well as a testimony to the strength of Scott's will, is the sad tale of Henry Weber, “Scott’s amanuensis” (77) whose shabby treatment by Scott led to Weber's final Ritson-like madness. Perhaps it was Weber's placing of another inconvenient obstacle into the path of Scott's grand literary border raid by making Scott aware of Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan at a time when Scott was championing Ercedoun's status as original author of the tale. Whatever the cause, Scott's withdrawal of support doomed the work of a scholar whose interests and methods were far closer to our own. Weber's fate produced an example of the virtual impossibility of finding a publisher or readership without strong sponsorship.

The next chapter extends the trajectory of Percy's decision to write for the aristocratic man of taste to its logical if not terribly practical conclusion, the elite editions produced by the closed literary societies that sprung up during the bibliomania of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Often unreadable and most certainly very often unread, these editions were produced by societies such as the Roxburghe in London and Scott's Bannatyne Club in the North. The Roxburghe, which became the model, consisted of wealthy aristocrats and some few wealthy middle class men. Each member was originally required to produce a volume available only by subscription to other members. “It was not scholarship but belonging that mattered in clubs. Antiquarian literature was an excuse for belonging to a club. For these men, their ability to print early literature was part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘aesthetic disposition’ . . . Editing early literature was not, for them, a mechanism of social and economic aspiration . . .” Under this system, “scholarship” was left entirely to the individual editor or his proxy when members were allowed to let others edit for them, so long as the required volume was produced. (Frederic Madden's Havelok was the first produced in this fashion and Frederick Furnivall began his career in this way- 88-89). Evaluation was often as much by look as contents. Yet despite the rather dubious nature of many of these volumes, “The subscription mechanism would become in the nineteenth century the resolution of the dilemma that had retarded publication of medieval literature in the eighteenth.... The subscription mechanism attempted to guarantee the more scholarly product for which editorial advances had created a demand, by bringing together in advance a community of people who would willingly pay for production. The need to create something salable [an object of taste as opposed to scholarship] was, in theory, circumvented” (87).

The remainder of Matthews’ tale largely belongs to the legendary Madden and Furnivall. Part of the readability of this chronicle is Matthews’ ability to weave his research into a narrative. In the first three chapters, it’s the recurring appearances of the Percy family that serves as a thread that binds the accounts
of these separate individuals into such a fascinating story. The chapter on Madden begins with an account of a medievalized tournament held by aristocrats to celebrate the coronation of Queen Victoria as well as Matthews’ deft paralleling the situation of Madden with the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the tale which Madden himself discovered and published in 1839. Comparing the aristocratic “knights,” Madden, Gawain, and a group of some 60 policemen sent from London to quell a Chartist riot in Birmingham, Matthews states,

> Like the London policemen and the Tory knights, Sir Gawain discovered that leaving the capital and going north on chivalric business can be dangerous occupation. Each of these narratives involves a perceived threat to traditional values...and in each case, the threat is dealt with by armed, officialized violence, either in its literal form or acted out in a ritualized version. So the police are sent north to suppress the working-class insurgency; a band of knights goes north to celebrate romantic conservative traditionalism, and a solitary knight goes north (Madden thought his destination to be in Cumberland) from the capital, the center of civilized, chivalrous values, to meet the monstrous force that has threatened its reputation. (114-15)

Here, then, is the essence of Matthews’ portrait of Madden whose career becomes a lens through which Matthews explores the essential connection between medievalism and conservatism, as it is practiced by Madden and the scholar antiquarians of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Through the aristocratic eyes of those to whom ancient texts had become an almost exclusive preserve, “The Middle Ages offered a softened, humanized hierarchical system, one in which everyone -- unlike the chartists -- knew his place (116). Again Matthews takes the opportunity to explore the privileged status of Romance, astutely noting that Madden consciously choose to edit the one romance written by the Pearl-poet rather than the three other religious poems. Madden’s political conservatism is shown to be at one with his editorial conservatism. Achieving “new standards of accuracy in transcribing” texts (128), Madden conserves the text by making his edition of *Sir Gawain* a typescript facsimile. For example, unlike all modern editors of the poem, Madden places the “bobs” of the bob and wheel stanzas in their original positions in the manuscript rather than between the long lines and the wheel, thereby reproducing the manuscript rather than the “logic” of the poem. Where Madden breaks with past editorial tradition is his interest in philology, but his is an interest that -- in accordance with his conservatism -- precludes any interest in the edited material as literature, something liable to multiple radical interpretations. And as Matthews perceptively observes, Madden’s editing favored unique or nearly unique manuscripts that yielded a type of “editorial utopianism” free from the pluralistic, multiple readings that are inherent in multiple copied texts such as *The Canterbury Tales* (130). Perhaps over-simply put, as Madden “fear[ed] the mob,” so too he practiced an editorship that avoided the multiple, the ‘mob’ of alternate readings taken from diverse manuscripts. Madden, then, becomes an exemplar of the theme of the politics of editing which runs throughout this text. In the end, though born into “humble” circumstances, Madden, “the last practitioner of an antiquarian self-shaping” (136) in the Percy tradition, is a “gentleman” (133). So, too, is his Gawain. We are reminded again that for all our pretense to the “science” of editing, an edited text is not a direct link to a manuscript but a highly mediated vision.

http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/03_01_was.html
If there is a hero to Matthews' tale, it is, without doubt, Frederick Furnivall, whose death marks the terminus of this account of the rise of Middle English as a "discipline," in the modern sense of the term. Much of that status derives from the fact that Furnivall's (and Matthews') politics and humanism are the politics of multiplicity and inclusion. (It also made him a hero, or at least model for Mr. Rat, in The Wind in the Willows.) For Matthews, Furnivall becomes a symbol of a new generation of scholars, including R. G. Latham and R. C. Trench, under whom “Romance was no longer the genre of dominance. Medieval literature was no longer in the hands of conservative aristocrats and those who would benefit from serving them” (138-39). This was in part the result of the new philology, which in the hands of this next generation had a “tendency to move outward from words to the people that used them” (143). Under Furnivall, texts moved outward as well into the hands of an educated middle class, as opposed to aristocratic club members, especially though the affordable EETS volumes and the OED. Under EETS, Middle English as a coherent body of material begins to coalesce. As Middle English literature was “handed to -- or forced on -- the middle class; it was democratized and reinvented as national heritage” (158). Matthews’ analysis of the EETS series, both its structure and its underlying assumptions is insightful and ought to be read by anyone who regularly resorts to this series.

The final step in this journey was the incorporation of this now unified material--for the first time labeled "Middle English" rather than “ancient"--into the academy, and it is here that Matthews switches his focus from Middle English to that special case Geoffrey Chaucer. While previous chapters have been anchored to portraits of the great editors, the penultimate chapter makes its most striking point by comparing two portraits of Chaucer, the Hoccleve and the Ellesmere. Matthews underscores the ubiquity (and exclusivity) of the Hoccleve portrait in pre twentieth century Chauceriana. The Hoccleve portrait, in Matthews' eyes, is an exemplar of “moral Chaucer,” the aged teacher and master fondly remembered. Hoccleve's Chaucer is safe and, in many ways, conservative. It only remains for Matthews to note the ubiquity of the Ellesmere Chaucer in twentieth century materials and to point out that the Ellesmere portrait is, in essence, a satirical one, aimed at Chaucer's girth and the “popet" of the Canterbury Tales. As such, the Ellesmere portrait is a far more dangerous, if not radical, Chaucer. The contrast tells a great deal of what democratization and middle-class, academic adoption has done to the poet in our times.

Having chronicled the rise of Middle English into the academy at the turn of the century, Matthews concludes with a meditation that runs a bit afield, but is nonetheless important. Jumping to our own times, almost a century after the putative end of his tale, Matthews takes up the status of medieval literature today, in particular its “marginalization" from society as a whole. In many ways, Matthews’ concerns here form a perfect companion to final chapter of another volume in the series, Chaucer Abroad by Stephen Ellis. Both Matthews and Ellis are concerned by the fact that Chaucer seems to lack a hold on the 'average' non-academic. In fact, Matthews takes up the question of whether the restriction of Middle English to the Academy is a sign of new elitism that parallels that of closed clubs of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “ So the moment of acceptance, of triumph, for Middle English, is very nearly the same moment
as its downfall, the creation of the marginal status that has been complained about ever since” (190). Also raised is Terry Eagleton’s claim that “by entering the academic institutional context and cutting itself off from any possibility of existence in a public sphere, criticism made itself secure but in the same moment ended its chances of being ‘a socially active force’” (191). But for all of Matthews’ descriptions of Madden’s “editorial utopianism” or the underlying Darwinian presumptions of evolution that underlie the work of previous scholars, Matthews himself reveals a fairly positivist notion of evolution as well as disciplinary unity, a vision of the present as better than the past because it adheres to this unity of discipline. In the end, the tale that Matthews relates is that often-privileged genre, romance. In keeping with the requirements of Romance, doubts such as Eagleton’s are entertained, but in the end the temptation is overcome as Matthews admits that there probably never was a time when the average country vicar, much less the great masses of the middle class, devoted themselves to the study of “ancient” texts. Moreover, as Matthews admits, “Put simply, more people are reading more Middle English than ever before. If this is marginalization, then we are going to have to work with it” (194). The myth of the “Gold Age” exploded, we can accept progress as real. In the end, Matthews’ tale is a performative one, as he writes the history of Middle English -- transcribing and editing the text of the discipline’s past -- this volume will become a part of the history that Matthews is describing, and that history is better for this volume and the self-awareness that it brings to our studies.

KEYWORDS: Middle English, editing
REVIEWED BY: Julian Wasserman
AFFILIATION: Loyola University/New Orleans
E-MAIL: wasser@loyno.edu
CONTACT ADDRESS: English Dept., Loyola University, New Orleans, LA 70118
PHONE NUMBER: 504-865-2277 (Office)

http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/03_01_was.html