

BRITISH IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF ANCIENT POETRY IN LATER EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the scholarly recovery and popular reception of ‘ancient poetry’ in later eighteenth-century England, with a view to elucidating the relationship between cultural primitivism and more overtly politicized discourses of national identity. The publication of the poems of Ossian, in the early 1760s, gave a new prominence to the earliest cultural productions of Celtic antiquity, and inspired the attempts of English literary historians, such as Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton, to provide an alternative ‘Gothic’ genealogy for the English literary imagination. However, both the English reception of Ossian, and the Gothicism scholarship of Percy and Warton, were complicated by the growing strength of English radical patriotism. As popular political discourse assumed an increasingly insular preoccupation with Saxon liberties and ancient constitutional rights, more conservative literary historians found their own attempts to ground English poetic tradition in some form of Gothic inheritance progressively compromised. The persistence of ancient constitutionalism as a divisive element of English political argument thus curtailed the ability of Gothicism literary scholarship to function as an effective vehicle for English cultural patriotism.*

I

The engraved title-page of Thomas Percy’s ballad collection, *Reliques of ancient English poetry* (1765), depicts a bardic harp propped against a dilapidated wall and an ancient oak (Fig. 1). Manuscript leaves lie scattered at its base, while in the background rise the broken piers and arches of a crumbling gothic edifice, their outline fading to a ghostly half-presence on the page. The ruinous setting suggests the pleasures of tasteful disintegration and ornamental decay, the conventional objects of the eighteenth-century antiquarian imagination. But the harp at its centre, and Latin motto beneath, also make a rather different claim for the distinctive power of literary antiquity (*opus vatium*) to transcend the depredations of time – a

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Fig. 1. Title-page of Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge. Shelfmark A/G.7.3.

claim that is further articulated in and through the collection itself. Percy's anthology invites the reader's appreciation as a set of textual 'relics', precariously salvaged from historical oblivion; but its contents are simultaneously presented as national possessions of enduring value, the lasting monuments of 'our ancient English Bards and Minstrels'. The *Reliques's* remarkable influence upon British literary culture derived, in large part, from the manner in which it thus dramatized the act of cultural transmission, transforming 'the first efforts of ancient genius' into a national literary corpus, finely bound in three volumes, complete with scholarly notes and explanatory historical essays.¹

The *Reliques's* original reviewers certainly recognized that the collection demanded to be read as a work of specifically 'English' literary history, and thus weighed against 'the late publication of Runic, Erse, and Welsh poems'.² More recent commentators have agreed that the historical significance of Percy's text is inseparable from a much broader contemporary revival of 'ancient' national literatures, which fundamentally reshaped the poetic traditions of Britain and Ireland.³ The expanding print networks linking these diverse territories provided new markets for the productions of folklorists, antiquarians, and collectors, for whom, in Peter Burke's words, 'the ancient, the distant and the popular' assumed a potent imaginative equivalence.⁴ As the cynosure of Homeric achievement yielded to a more eclectic cultural primitivism, polite eighteenth-century readers discovered a new enthusiasm for the imaginative products of the northern European past – from the lost bardic epics of an imagined Celtic prehistory, to Runic song, medieval romance, and old popular ballads. The resultant displacement of inherited literary hierarchies had profound consequences for the development of 'Romantic' taste, and gave the loose, quasi-generic category of ancient poetry a new significance within late eighteenth-century discourses of nationhood and ethnicity.

The recovery of indigenous literary antiquities proceeded with greatest urgency in Britain's Celtic peripheries, where the revival of ancient bardic song provided a distinctive medium for the patriotic celebration of cultural difference while

¹ Thomas Percy, *Reliques of ancient English poetry* (3 vols., London, 1765), II, pp. ix, vi. The present article is indebted both to Bertram H. Davis, *Thomas Percy: a scholar-cleric in the age of Johnson* (Philadelphia, 1989); and to Nick Groom, *The making of Percy's Reliques* (Oxford, 1999), although I depart in certain respects from the latter's interpretation of Percy's work.

² *Annual Register*, 8 (1765), p. 310. See also *Critical Review*, 19 (1765), p. 119. The *Reliques* went through four editions in the eighteenth century, and over twenty editions in the nineteenth (in addition to reprinted selections from the collection, and separate editions of Percy's literary-historical essays). See Nick Groom, 'The formation of Percy's *Reliques*', in Percy, *Reliques* (1765), facs. edn (3 vols., London, 1996), I, pp. 53–4.

³ The influence of the *Reliques* on the literary cultures of England, Scotland, and Ireland can be traced in Albert B. Friedman, *The ballad revival: studies in the influence of popular on sophisticated poetry* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 233–58; Leith Davis, *Acts of union: Scotland and the literary negotiation of the British nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford, 1998), pp. 144–67; Norman Vance, 'Celts, Carthaginians and constitutions: Anglo-Irish literary relations, 1780–1820', *Irish Historical Studies*, 22 (1981), pp. 216–38, at p. 221.

⁴ Peter Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (1978; rev. edn, Aldershot, 1994), p. 10.

largely foregoing any more fundamental challenge to the Anglocentric political structures of the eighteenth-century British state.⁵ This Celtophile bardic revivalism achieved sudden and lasting literary prominence with the publication, in the early 1760s, of the ‘poems of Ossian’. Reputedly the work of a third-century highland bard, Ossian’s Gaelic epics were presented to the public in a series of pseudo-Homeric English ‘translations’ by an obscure young author named James Macpherson. But while Macpherson’s supporters among the whig literati of Edinburgh regarded the poems’ survival as fascinating evidence of the customs and manners of Scotland’s ancient Celtic peoples, their sentimentalized depiction of a lost bardic civilization was also greeted with persistent (and well-founded) accusations of forgery.⁶ The ensuing debate on the poems’ antiquity did little for Macpherson’s reputation, yet Ossian’s *succès de scandale* nevertheless stimulated widespread fascination with the ancient Celts as a distinct cultural and ethnic group, whose poetry, religion, and manners could be distinguished from the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus.⁷ Rival investigations into the archaic bardic civilizations of ‘Cambro-British’ Wales and ‘Milesian’ Ireland quickly followed. But the terms of the Ossian controversy, and the revival of interest in the ancient Celtic bard, also inspired Thomas Percy’s answering defence of English literary antiquity.⁸

While initially sceptical of the Ossian poems’ authenticity, Percy recognised the imaginative appeal of the ancient bard, and concurred that the Celtic

⁵ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Inventing and resisting Britain: cultural identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685–1789* (Houndmills, 1997), pp. 153–9; Katie Trumpener, *Bardic nationalism: the Romantic novel and the British empire* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 3–34.

⁶ The scholarly literature on Ossian is now remarkably extensive. Some of the more important studies include: Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic sources of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’* (Edinburgh, n.d. [1952]); Fiona Stafford, *The sublime savage: a study of James Macpherson and the poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988); Howard Gaskill, ed., *Ossian revisited* (Edinburgh, 1991); Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and romance in James Macpherson’s The poems of Ossian* (Aldershot, 2003).

⁷ James Macpherson, ‘A dissertation concerning the antiquity, & c. of the poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal’, in idem, *Temora, an ancient epic poem* (London, 1763), p. iii: ‘The Germans, properly so called, were not the same with the ancient Celtæ.’ Macpherson later revised his position: see idem, *The poems of Ossian* (new edn, 2 vols., London, 1773), II, p. 216; and below n. 67. On the role of bardic revivalism in the construction of Celtic identities, see inter alia, Murray G. H. Pittock, *Celtic identity and the British image* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 35–41; Terence Brown, ed., *Celticism* (Amsterdam, 1996); Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: the construction of a myth* (Houndmills, 1992), pp. 120–45; Peter Womack, *Improvement and romance: constructing the myth of the highlands* (Houndmills, 1989), pp. 87–114; Sam Smiles, *The image of antiquity: ancient Britons and the Romantic imagination* (New Haven, CT, 1994), pp. 46–74.

⁸ Evan Evans, ‘De bardis dissertatio’, in idem, *Some specimens of the antient Welsh bards* (London, 1764), pp. 63–4; [Charles O’Conor], *Dissertations on the history of Ireland* (2nd edn, Dublin, 1766); Sylvester O’Halloran, *An introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland* (Dublin, 1772), pp. 310–13; Claire O’Halloran, ‘Irish recreations of the Gaelic past: the challenge of Macpherson’s Ossian’, *Past and Present*, 124 (1989), pp. 69–95; idem, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: antiquarian debate and cultural politics in Ireland, c. 1750–1800* (Cork, 2004), pp. 97–124; Colin Kidd, ‘Gaelic antiquity and national identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland’, *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994), pp. 1197–214. Macpherson’s influence on Percy is suggested by Frank Edgar Farley, *Scandinavian influences in the English Romantic movement* (Boston, MA, 1903), p. 28; and Davis, *Thomas Percy*, pp. 71–2; but receives its fullest treatment in Groom, *Making*, pp. 61–105.

and Germanic nations were indeed ‘*ab origine* different’.⁹ This distinction, which represented a significant departure from the conventional terms of early-modern historical ethnology, allowed the differential articulation of a distinctive ‘Gothic’, or Germanic, source for English song culture, thereby dramatically recasting the chronological limits of the nation’s literary past. The historical essays in Percy’s *Reliques* traced the remote genealogy of English ballad and romance back to the ‘northern SCALDS’ and the ‘chivalric’ manners of the Saxons and Danes.¹⁰ The popular ballad tradition preserved in the pages of the *Reliques* could thus be claimed as the vestigial, textualized remains of the ‘ancient’ English minstrels, who were themselves treated by Percy as ‘the embodiment of the Gothic aesthetic’.¹¹ The *Reliques*’ cultural rehabilitation of Gothic antiquity helped to fix both the old English minstrelsy and the ‘age of chivalry’ in the popular historical imagination of the early nineteenth century.¹² It also exercised an important influence on the first extended work of English literary historiography, *The history of English poetry* (1774–81) by the Oxford Professor of Poetry, Thomas Warton. Adapting Percy’s work in the *Reliques* to a larger scholarly agenda, Warton traced the rise of the nation’s poetic genius from its distant sources in the ancient ‘Gothic’ tribes of Europe and Asia, through medieval romance, and on to the imaginative efflorescence of the English Renaissance.¹³

However, the recovery of England’s deep literary past also had a rather different, and more politicized, significance. As both Percy and Warton were well aware, the ‘Gothic hive’ of Eurasian antiquity could legitimately be claimed as the remote origin not only of England’s ancient poetic genius, but also of its government and laws. The Germanic sources of the nation’s legal and political institutions remained a qualified, but commonplace, element of historical scholarship and political argument throughout the eighteenth century, while patriotic representations of Saxon liberties, the Confessor’s Laws, and Magna Carta continued to shape a widespread popular conviction of the profound continuities

⁹ Percy to Evan Evans, 23 Apr. 1764, Aneurin Lewis, ed., *Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans* ([Baton Rouge], LA, 1957), p. 88; see also Percy’s preface to his translation of Paul-Henri Mallet’s *Introduction à l’histoire de Dannemarc* (1755–6), published as *Northern antiquities* (2 vols., London, 1770), I, pp. xii–xiii; and on Percy’s revisionary ethnology, see Colin Kidd, *British identities before nationalism: ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic world, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 207–9.

¹⁰ Percy, ‘An essay on the ancient English minstrels’, *Reliques*, I, pp. xv–xxi; idem, ‘On the ancient metrical romances’, *Reliques*, III, pp. ii–vii. See also the introduction to Percy’s earlier anthology of Old Norse materials, *Five pieces of Runic poetry* (London, 1763), sigs. A2r–A5v; Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse muse in Britain, 1750–1820* (Trieste, 1998), pp. 51–104. ¹¹ Groom, *Making*, p. 98 (quotation).

¹² Kathryn Sutherland, ‘The native poet: the influence of Percy’s minstrel from Beattie to Wordsworth’, *Review of English Studies*, 33 (1982), pp. 414–33; Mark Girouard, *The return to Camelot: chivalry and the English gentleman* (New Haven, CT, 1981), p. 20; Alice Chandler, *A dream of order: the medieval ideal in nineteenth-century literature* (Lincoln, NB, 1970), p. 16–17.

¹³ Thomas Warton, *The history of English poetry, from the close of the eleventh to the commencement of the eighteenth century* (3 vols., London, 1774–81), facs. edn, ed. David Fairer (4 vols., London, 1998); Richard Terry, *Poetry and the making of the English literary past, 1660–1781* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 297–9.

underlying English political history.¹⁴ Indeed, according to Kathleen Wilson, the late eighteenth-century ‘Gothic revival’ in literature and the arts coincided with a growing belief, ‘not only that the Saxons had provided the most perfect constitution the world had ever seen, but also that they set the standards of political liberty and civilization which other peoples, including the Celts, could only emulate’.¹⁵

Such observations suggest that the politics of ancient poetry in later eighteenth-century England would repay more sustained attention. Yet the specific ideological contexts of English literary scholarship in this period remain relatively unclear – certainly in comparison to Scotland and Ireland, where the relationship between bardic revivalism and patriot politics has attracted far more detailed scrutiny. The aristocratic and chivalric emphases of works such as the *Reliques*, together with the typically genteel class affiliations of English antiquarianism, might suggest that Gothicism literary scholarship should be regarded as a relatively depoliticized expression of neo-feudal nostalgia.¹⁶ Yet a number of historians have also suggested that the critical reevaluation of English literary antiquity contributed an important cultural and ethnic dimension to resurgent pride in England’s ancient Saxon institutions of government, preparing the ground for the emergence of nineteenth-century Teutonism and ‘racialized’ Anglo-Saxonism.¹⁷

The following article will seek to clarify the cultural politics of English literary scholarship in this formative period by attending, in the first instance, to the highly contentious status of Celtic poetical antiquities in the 1760s. While the remarkable impact of Ossianic primitivism on British culture certainly quickened the researches of rival literary historians, it also provoked sustained and belligerent attack from Scotophobic English patriots. Indeed, the increasingly radicalized and insular character of English patriot discourse in this period provides a vital

¹⁴ Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s philosophical politics* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 233–60; R. J. Smith, *The Gothic bequest: medieval institutions in British thought, 1688–1863* (Cambridge, 1987); J. G. A. Pocock, *The ancient constitution and the feudal law: a study of English historical thought in the seventeenth century* (1957; Cambridge, 1987), pp. 362–87.

¹⁵ Kathleen Wilson, *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁶ Smith, *Gothic bequest*, pp. 97–8; Linda Colley, ‘Radical patriotism in eighteenth-century England’, in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: the making and unmaking of British national identity* (3 vols., London, 1989), 1, pp. 169–87, at pp. 181–2. On the social composition of the antiquarian movement in this period, see Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: the discovery of the past in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 2004), pp. 31–79.

¹⁷ This argument emerges most clearly from Gerald Newman’s influential (and controversial) study, *The rise of English nationalism: a cultural history, 1740–1830* (1987; Houndmills, 1997), pp. 109–20. But see also Wilson, *Island race*, pp. 85–6; Reginald Horsman, ‘Origins of racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), pp. 387–410, at pp. 390–1; Thomas Preston Peardon, *The transition in English historical writing, 1760–1830* (New York, 1933), pp. 103–26; Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial myth in English history: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal, 1982), pp. 81–6; and Laura Doyle, ‘The racial sublime’, in Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh, eds., *Romanticism, race, and imperial culture, 1780–1834* (Bloomington, IN, 1996), pp. 15–39. The convergence of constitutional and cultural forms of Gothicism discourse is tacitly assumed throughout Samuel Klinger’s *The Goths in England: a study in seventeenth and eighteenth century thought* (Harvard, 1952).

interpretative context not only for the English reception of Ossianic cultural primitivism, but also for the Gothicism literary scholarship of Percy's *Reliques* and Warton's *History of English poetry*. Both these texts inspired a new interest in the remote origins of the native literary tradition, and both sought to ground their foundational narrative of the English literary imagination in some form of Gothic inheritance. Yet in these respects the work of Percy and Warton was also significantly informed by the turbulent nature of English political argument between the end of the Seven Years War and the American Revolution.

The accession of George III, the Peace of Paris, and the growing power of organized extraparliamentary opinion, all helped to precipitate a period of extended political crisis in which British identities, and English history, were subject to repeated, and often violent, contestation. While Scottish writers and academics defended the ancient bardic poetry of the highlands as an expression of 'North British' identity, English radical patriots seized on Celtic cultural revivalism as a foil for chauvinistic anti-ministerial polemic. As Scottish influence on the new king revived fears of arbitrary government and jacobite intrigue, hostile attacks on Celtophile cultural primitivism converged with popular defences of England's ancient liberties and Gothic law, forcing English literary scholars to turn their own accounts of medieval literary culture against the constitutionalist rhetoric of an emergent radical platform. The scholarly aspiration to forge a distinctively English literary history – founded on the recovery of the nation's earliest poetical remains – was thus shaped in opposition both to Celtic literary antiquity, and to more demotic and radicalized forms of patriotic English *mythistoire*.

II

The politics of British literary antiquity in the early 1760s was determined, to a remarkable extent, by the swelling tide of popular English resentment directed at a single Scottish politician: John Stuart, the third earl of Bute. A close personal attachment to George III propelled Bute to the heights of ministerial office within months of the new reign, but his political inexperience, combined with the undoubted influence he enjoyed over the young king, did little to recommend him to potential parliamentary allies.¹⁸ Bute enjoyed even less support out of doors, particularly once rumours of a liaison with the Princess Dowager of Wales heightened the growing fear that he exercised a dangerous and illicit influence over the British monarch. The king's 'favourite' quickly became a powerful symbol of corruption, Francophilic crypto-jacobitism, and political ambition of a sinister and unconstitutional tendency.¹⁹ Bute's Scottishness was inextricably linked with all of these charges, and made him the focus for a yet more generalized

¹⁸ Richard Pares, *King George III and the politicians* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 100–2.

¹⁹ John Brewer, 'The misfortunes of Lord Bute', *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 3–43; idem, 'The faces of Lord Bute: a visual contribution to Anglo-American political ideology', *Perspectives in American History*, 6 (1972), pp. 95–116.

form of popular resentment at the supposed threat to English liberty and prosperity posed by an émigré army of unwashed, tartan-clad, Caledonian placemen.

Patriotic Scotophobia of this kind had a relatively diffuse appeal within the lower and middle ranks of English society in the decades after 1745, and was quickly seized upon by the unscrupulous opposition campaign led by the aspiring politician (and accomplished rake) John Wilkes, from the pages of his journal, the *North Briton*.²⁰ Wilkes's prosecution by the government on charges of seditious and blasphemous libel in 1763–64, his exile in France, and his scandalous return to parliamentary politics in 1768, provided a compelling and colourful focus for an incipiently radicalized popular political movement of considerable energy and influence. Yet the strength, and ideological complexion, of Wilkite radicalism remained as much a product of bellicose national prejudice as principled argument.²¹

The publication of Macpherson's *Fragments of ancient poetry* (1760), together with the subsequent Ossianic 'epics' *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763) was therefore a gift to Wilkite propagandists eager to exploit the 'odious and impolittick distinction of country' in their campaign against the king's favourite.²² Bardic harps began to appear alongside priapic bagpipes in satirical prints depicting Bute's supposed sexual indiscretions with the Princess of Wales, while popular verse such as *The staff of Gisbal* used Ossianic parody to much the same end.²³ But there was more to the Wilkites' use and abuse of Macpherson's poetry than opportunistic innuendo. For one thing, the popularity of Ossian amongst English reading audiences supplied a provocative confirmation of Scotland's burgeoning influence within the Union. 'We are certainly growing into fashion,' announced Wilkes's *North Briton*, in the character of a smug, Butite Scot. 'The most rude of our bards are admired; and I know some choice wits here, who have thrown aside *Shakespeare*, and taken up *Fingal*, charmed with the vanity of character, and

²⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 105–17; Eric Richards, 'Scotland and the uses of the Atlantic empire', in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the realm: cultural margins of the first British empire* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), pp. 67–114, at pp. 87–91, 99–100; Jim Smyth, *The making of the United Kingdom, 1660–1800: state, religion and identity in Britain and Ireland* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 156–60.

²¹ On Wilkes's personal career, see Peter D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: a friend to liberty* (Oxford, 1996). The most valuable studies of the broader Wilkite movement are to be found in John Brewer, *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 163–200; and Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 206–36, both of which considerably amplify upon George Rudé's earlier study, *Wilkes and liberty* (Oxford, 1962).

²² *A North Briton extraordinary* (London, 1765), p. 21 (quotation), a spirited counterblast to Wilkite Scotophobia.

²³ *The bed foot* (1762), Frederick George Stephens and M. Dorothy George, *British Museum catalogue of political and personal satires* (11 vols., n.p. [London], 1870–1954; hereafter BM Sat), 3884; see also *The staff of Gisbal: an hyperborean song* (London, 1762), BM Sat 3848; *Gisbal, an hyperborean tale* (2nd edn, London, 1762); *Gisbal and Bathsheba, in the hyperborean tale* (London, 1762), BM Sat 3850; Vincent Carretta, *The snarling muse: visual and verbal satire from Pope to Churchill* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 239–42; Diana Donald, *The age of caricature: satirical prints in the age of George III* (New Haven, CT, 1996), pp. 50–60.

richness of imagery'.²⁴ Beyond such direct expressions of English cultural patriotism, the politics of literary Celtophilia were also quite directly implicated in the Wilkite critique of recrudescing Toryism, arbitrary government, and political corruption. Bute's peculiar status as the king's favourite raised some fundamental constitutional problems for his opponents, not least of which concerned the legitimate uses of public patronage under ministerial control.²⁵ Such issues, which lay at the heart of much opposition argument, resonated with a broader, class-inflected rejection of aristocratic clientele in both the political and economic spheres.²⁶ More specifically, however, Bute's extensive financial subsidies to journalists, poets, and men of letters also suggested that the Wilkite exposure of 'corruption' and 'placemen' could find direct application to contemporary literary culture.²⁷

Robert Lloyd's verse satire, 'The Poetry Professors', first published in the *North Briton* in 1762, provides a particularly revealing example of the way in which Wilkite radicalism sought to implicate the English vogue for Ossianic primitivism within a broader attack on Bute's patronage system. 'The Poetry Professors' begins as a satire on the stilted, sycophantic erudition of contemporary English poets. But it is not long before Lloyd turns (with the irreverent errancy that characterizes much Wilkite verse) to the matter of Scotland. The deficiencies of English academic wits thus give way, in the poem's second part, to the mock-panegyric description of a 'walking University', exporting over-educated Scots to the metropolis in search of place and promotion from Lord Bute, 'Master of Sciences and Arts, | MÆCENAS to all Men of Parts':

MACPHERSON leads the flaming Van,
LAIRD of the *new* Fingalian Clan;
While JACKY HOME brings up the rear,
With new-got pension, neat and clear,
Three hundred *English* pounds a year.²⁸

²⁴ *North Briton*, no. 2 (12 June 1762), repr. in *The North Briton* (3 vols., London, 1763), I, p. 17. Ossianic Anglo-Scottish cultural miscegenation was indeed remarkably widespread in this period. For some particularly egregious examples, see 'A versification of the fifth fragment of ancient poetry. From the Galic [*sic*] or Erse language. A piece in the taste of the celebrated Mr Gray', in *A collection of original poems* (2 vols., London, 1760), I, pp. 168–70; and 'An account of the expedition against Martinico; attempted in the manner of Fingal, or the song of Ossian', *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 24 Mar. 1762, p. 4. A more general survey (not including these titles) is provided by Edward D. Snyder, *The Celtic revival in English literature, 1700–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1923). ²⁵ Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 120–1, 250.

²⁶ Idem, 'Commercialization and politics', in Neil McKendrick et al., eds., *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982), pp. 197–262; Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and cities: popular politics in the age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 405–6.

²⁷ [John Almon], *Biographical, literary, and political anecdotes* (3 vols., London, 1797), II, pp. 9–10; Dustin Griffin, *Literary patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 61–5; Robert R. Rea, *The English press in politics, 1760–1774* (Lincoln, NB, 1963), pp. 13–41; Brewer, 'Misfortunes', pp. 11–19; Karl W. Schweizer, 'Lord Bute and the press: the origins of the press war of 1762 reconsidered', in idem, ed., *Lord Bute: essays in re-interpretation* (Leicester, 1988), pp. 83–98.

²⁸ *North Briton*, no. 26 (27 Nov. 1762), II, p. 29; the first part appeared in *North Briton*, no. 22 (30 Oct. 1762); repr. in Robert Lloyd, *Poetical works* (2 vols., London, 1774), I, pp. 31–40. On the poem's

Although couched in the rhetoric of coarse national prejudice, this climactic section of Lloyd's poem pointedly draws its reader's attention to a more specific alignment between Bute's 'English' system of political and literary patronage, and a 'Fingalian Clan' of Scottish literati – and in this respect, at least, Lloyd's aspersions contained a certain element of truth. The Ossian poems were indeed commissioned and promoted by a group of influential Edinburgh academics and churchmen associated with the 'Moderate' whig-presbyterian party. As Richard Sher has argued, the publication of Macpherson's Ossianic verse was conceived by prominent Moderates as a literary expression of North-British patriotism, and thus as part of a larger campaign of unionist whiggism which also included controversial calls for a Scottish militia.²⁹ The dramatist John ('JACKY') Home was a leading spokesman for the Moderate cause, while Bute himself was one of the party's most important patrons, not least through his employment of Home as his private secretary (hence the notorious 'new-got pension').³⁰ Moreover, although neither Macpherson nor Home were members of the Scottish professoriate (indeed, there were no 'Poetry Professors' in Scotland at this time), Bute had recently been involved in the creation of a Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres for the leading Moderate Hugh Blair, who was also closely involved in the sponsorship of Macpherson's work.³¹

These links became all the more evident in March 1763, when Macpherson openly acknowledged Bute's patronage of his Ossianic 'translations' in the fulsome dedication to *Temora*.³² Within a matter of weeks, 'The Poetry Professors' was reprinted in pamphlet form, headed by a caricature of Macpherson and Home (Fig. 2).³³ Both men are depicted crowned with laurels and thistles (a nice comment on the classical echoes that detractors and supporters alike discerned in

polemical Scotophobic context, see Lloyd to Wilkes, 22 Aug. 1762, British Library (BL) Add. MS 30867, fos. 182–3.

²⁹ Richard B. Sher's comprehensive study, *Church and university in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Moderate literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ, 1985), pp. 213–61, details both the Moderates' association with Macpherson, and the ideological connections between bardic patriotism and the militia issue. Sher briefly suggests the pertinence of 'The Poetry Professors' to the Moderates' sponsorship of Ossian, but misattributes the poem to Wilkes (p. 249). See also idem, "'Those Scotch imposters and their cabal': Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment", *Man and Nature*, 1 (1982), pp. 55–63; and Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in national context* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 19–40, at p. 34.

³⁰ Richard B. Sher, "'The favourite of the Favourite": John Home, Bute and the politics of patriotic poetry', in Schweizer, ed., *Lord Bute*, pp. 181–212.

³¹ Roger L. Emerson, 'Lord Bute and the Scottish universities 1760–1792', in Schweizer, ed., *Lord Bute*, pp. 156–7. Blair's lectures on Ossian were subsequently published as *A critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal* (1763; 2nd edn, London, 1765). The *Dissertation* was thereafter included in most editions of the poems. For Wilkes's disparaging view of Bute's connections with the Scottish professoriate, see Wilkes to Churchill, 15 July 1762, BL Add. MS 30878, fo. 4r.

³² Macpherson, *Temora*, A2r; for the dedication's satirical treatment by Wilkes, see *North Briton*, III, p. 107; and see also the more extensive dedication to Bute in James Macpherson, *The works of Ossian, the son of Fingal* (2 vols., London, 1765).

³³ BM Sat 3869. For evidence of the pamphlet's date of publication, see *Public Advertiser*, 31 May 1763, p. 1, col. 3.



Fig. 2. 'The Glasgow and Aberdeen Professors of Poetry' (1763), a Wilkite caricature of John Home (left) and James Macpherson (right). Copyright the Trustees of the British Museum. BM Sat 3869 (detail).

Ossian), and both are in the dishevelled condition in which émigré Scots were typically represented by the Wilkite prints. Macpherson, on the right, is draped in plaid and declaims from an Ossianic parchment, while Home deferentially proffers a manuscript – perhaps that of his play, *The fatal discovery*, which was based upon the ninth of Macpherson's *Fragments of ancient poetry*.³⁴ The precise identity of Home's text is, however, of rather less importance than his posture and profile, which supply the most telling indication of the broader political context of both the image, and Lloyd's poem. Home's pose constitutes a direct visual allusion to one of the best-known satirical prints of this period, 'The Hungry Mob of Scriblers and Etchers' (1762), in which he is similarly depicted at the head of a mingled crowd of political satirists and men of letters, soliciting pecuniary largesse from the king's favourite. Home's supplicatory gesture in the 'Poetry Professors' print thus conflates, with cunning economy, both his imaginative obligations to Ossian, and his financial obeisance to the corrupt, Maecenas-like Bute.³⁵

Lloyd's association of Macpherson's poetry with a literary cabal of Butite placemen was widely echoed within Wilkite polemic of the mid-1760s, but found

³⁴ Although Home's play was not performed until 1769, rumours of his Ossianic drama were circulating seven years earlier. See William Shenstone to Thomas Percy, 16 May 1762; Cleanth Brooks, ed., *The correspondence of Thomas Percy with William Shenstone* (New Haven, CT, 1977), p. 153; BL Add. MS 28221, fo. 95r.

³⁵ See BM Sat 3844; M. Dorothy George, *English political caricature to 1792: a study of opinion and propaganda* (2 vols., Oxford, 1959), 1, p. 122.

its most sustained expression in the satires of Charles Churchill, the co-editor of the *North Briton* and one of the most celebrated and provocative poets of his day.³⁶ In a succession of scandalously successful satirical poems, Churchill repeatedly mocked Macpherson as a talentless impostor, whose fraudulent verse betrayed the Scottish ambition to ‘rule in letters, as they ruled the realm’.³⁷ Such parallelisms supported a further analogy, between Macpherson’s spurious literary evocations of Gaelic antiquity, and the equally dishonest historical misrepresentations supposedly peddled by Scottish ‘tories’ such as David Hume.³⁸ The poems of Ossian could thus be yoked with Hume’s *History of England* (1754–62) as the mendacious inspiration for ambitious and unprincipled government hacks:

If fashionable grown, and fond of pow’r
With *hum’rous* SCOTS let Them disport their hour;
Let Them dance, fairy like, round OSSIAN’s tomb;
Let Them forge *lies*, and *histories* for HUME³⁹

For Churchill, Hume’s sceptical historiography was little better than the ‘mock creation of a Poet’s dream’, so it was ironically appropriate that the despotic, crypto-jacobite machinations of the king’s Scottish favourite should find a corresponding literary *mythos* in Macpherson’s misty-eyed epics of ancient highland kingship.⁴⁰ Wilkite satire in the early 1760s repeatedly disparaged the ‘old, new’ Ossian as an ‘ancient Novelty’, a fraudulent pseudo-historical document which recalled, in its contrived antiquity, the illegitimate dynastic claims of Scotland’s ‘most antient kingdom’ to the English throne.⁴¹

The Wilkite assault upon Ossian thus signalled a significant departure from the broadly Celtophile tendencies of much eighteenth-century whig culture. The poets and dramatists associated with the ‘patriot’ opposition to Walpole, thirty years previously, had frequently employed bardic and druidical themes, and a residual immemorialist attachment to ancient British liberties persisted beyond

³⁶ Neal Schaeffer, ‘Charles Churchill’s political journalism’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 9 (1976), pp. 406–28. The most important studies of Churchill’s poetry include Carretta, *Snarling muse*; Lance Bertelsen, *The Nonsense Club: literature and popular culture, 1749–1764* (Oxford, 1986); and Thomas Lockwood, *Post-Augustan satire: Charles Churchill and satirical poetry, 1750–1800* (Seattle, WA, 1979).

³⁷ Charles Churchill, ‘The candidate’ (1764), *Poetical works*, ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford, 1956), p. 352; see also pp. 71, 235, 339.

³⁸ On the symbolic equivalence of Scots, tories and Jacobites within Wilkite discourse, see Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 213; [John Almon], *The history of the late minority* (1765; 3rd edn, London, 1766), p. 27; Churchill, *Poetical works*, p. 210. ³⁹ Charles Churchill, ‘The journey’ (1765), *Poetical works*, p. 442.

⁴⁰ Churchill, *Poetical works*, p. 326. Of course, such attacks involved gross misrepresentation of both Hume and Macpherson; it is significant, however, that the latter’s political loyalties continue to provoke disagreement, and have been variously identified with both Jacobite nostalgia and North-British whiggery. See, respectively, Murray G. H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite politics in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 178–86; Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s past: Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689–c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 219–39.

⁴¹ Churchill, *Poetical works*, p. 198; [Percival Stockdale], *Churchill defended, a poem: addressed to the minority* (London, 1765), p. 9; *North Briton*, no. 4 (26 June 1762), 1, p. 30; *The prophecy of famine: a Scots pastoral. Part the second* (London, 1763). The ministerial press responded in kind: see Tobias Smollett’s *The Briton*, no. 11 (7 Aug. 1762).

mid-century, sanctioning less partisan literary recreations of free-spirited Celtic resistance to Roman and Plantaganet repression.⁴² But although such imaginative licence continued to enjoy a respectable, if somewhat attenuated, historiographical sanction, the libertarian credentials of the ‘ancient British’ peoples were increasingly qualified by more antagonistic assertions of political and national difference.⁴³ With the rise of anti-ministerial Scotophobia in the early 1760s, and the exposure of Bute’s links to Macpherson and his Moderate supporters, Celtophile cultural primitivism came to figure more specifically within opposition argument as a symptom of imaginative and ideological capitulation to Bute’s Fingalian clan of ‘Scottish Jacobites, Scottish poets, and a few English Tories’.⁴⁴ Churchill’s *Prophecy of famine* (1763) remains most notorious for its attacks on prominent Scottish writers such as Macpherson, Home, and Allan Ramsay. But the poem also ridicules William Mason, author of the faux Celtic *Caractacus* (1759), and scornfully disparages the erstwhile leader of the patriot whigs, George Lyttelton, for his retreat to ‘the green umbrage of some Druid’s seat’.⁴⁵ For Churchill and his imitators, the Ossian controversy exposed the literary charms of the ancient Celt as the imaginative adjunct of whig apostasy, and vindicated the alternative, pejorative identification of British prehistory with despotism, arbitrary government, and ideological mystification. Scotland’s Ossianic ‘sages deeply read in mystic lore | Are now whate’er the Druids were before’.⁴⁶

The prominence afforded to Ossian in Wilkite polemic does not, therefore, indicate the displacement of political satire by more purely ‘literary’ topics. On the contrary, Macpherson’s forgeries seem to have been regarded within radical circles as the pre-eminent cultural manifestation of a broader, and more dangerous, attempt to rewrite the British past so as to obscure the historical rights

⁴² Christine Gerrard, *The patriot opposition to Walpole: politics, poetry, and national myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 136–49; Pittock, *Celtic identity*, pp. 34–5. The celebration of ancient ‘British Virtue’ was also an occasional theme of court whig poets of this earlier period: see Thomas Cooke, *The Bath* (London, 1726), p. 6. The most significant productions of English literary Celtophilia in the 1750s were Thomas Gray, ‘The bard: a Pindaric ode’, in *Odes by Mr Gray* (Strawberry Hill, 1757); and [William Mason], *Caractacus, a dramatic poem* (London, 1759).

⁴³ For the persistence of a nominal immemorialism within English jurisprudence, see Smiles, *Image of antiquity*, pp. 124–5; and William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the laws of England* (4 vols., London, 1766–9), 1, p. 64, which offers a limited endorsement of Sir John Fortescue’s speculation that the common law originated with the ‘primitive Britons’.

⁴⁴ [Almon], *History of the late minority*, p. 64 (quotation).

⁴⁵ Churchill, *Poetical works*, p. 197. This line also contains a subtle allusion to Lyttelton’s friend, the leading patriot whig poet James Thomson. Lyttelton’s enthusiasm for Ossian was apparently the cause for some sly comment on his changing literary and political loyalties. According to one contemporary epigram, Lyttelton ‘Prefers new acquaintance in Poetry & Wit, | Macpherson to Homer, Newcastle to Pitt’: *Early letters of Bishop Richard Hurd 1739–1762*, ed. Sarah Brewer (Woodbridge, 1995), p. 389.

⁴⁶ *The prophecy of famine ... Part the second*, p. 3. On the earlier, pro-Stuart associations of ancient British mythography, to which Wilkite discourse sometimes appears to allude, see Pittock, *Celtic identity*, pp. 17–19. Some English whig antiquarians did continue to stress the political liberties enjoyed by the ancient Britons. See, for example, John Whitaker, *The history of Manchester* (4 vols., London, 1771–5), 1, pp. 247–83, 392–400.

of the 'ENGLISHMAN, in *charter'd* FREEDOM born'.⁴⁷ Moreover, by dissevering reformist and radical whig discourse from libertarian bardic primitivism, Wilkite Scotophobia played a significant role in divesting the cultural sensibilities of oppositional whiggism of their earlier Celtic accretions, and preparing the ground for the re-emergence of Saxonist prejudices which had lain largely dormant since the seventeenth century. Radical historians of this period revived controversial claims for 'that enlarged system of liberty introduced by the Saxons' and the 'fatal blow' it received from the Norman Conquest; while, in turn, the rhetoric of libertarian Saxonism exerted a growing influence on the representation of British cultural and ethnic identities within popular patriotic discourse.⁴⁸ As popular xenophobia converged with the defence of England's 'ancient liberties', Wilkite political prints championed Magna Carta as the last bulwark against Scottish corruption, and popular songs reviled Bute's rule as a 'Scotch Yoke' imposed in defiance of John Bull's ancient 'Charter'.⁴⁹ The exposure of Scottish ministerial despotism, and its Celtophile literary apologists, thus found a potent polemical counterpoint in the defence of ancient English liberties with their roots in a pre-Norman era of Saxon freedom.

Such arguments might seem somewhat remote from the intellectual pre-occupations of literary antiquarians such as Percy and Warton. Yet the politics of the ancient constitution had important implications for Gothicism literary scholarship, not least because the nation's political and constitutional history continued to provide such an attractive framework for the representation of its literary past. Richard Hurd's *Letters on chivalry and romance* (1762), for example, one of the earliest defences of English metrical romance, was originally designed 'on Gothic, that is on Feudal Principles', as part of an orthodox whig vindication of England's ancient constitution.⁵⁰ Thomas Percy, likewise, remained convinced that the 'German forests' contained not only the wellsprings of the English

⁴⁷ Cf. Carretta, *Snarling muse*, p. 239; Churchill, 'Gotham', bk 1 (1764), *Poetical works*, p. 294; see also *ibid.*, pp. 305, 312; [John Nichols], 'Stanzas to liberty', in *idem*, *The buds of Parnassus: a collection of original poems* (London, 1763), p. 14.

⁴⁸ Catharine Macaulay, *The history of England* (8 vols., London, 1763–83), II, p. 1; Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in *Puritanism and revolution* (London, 1958), pp. 50–122.

⁴⁹ *The Scotch yoke; or English resentment* (London, 1763), BM Sat 4033. For radical representations of Magna Carta in this period as alternately the victim, and vanquisher, of Scottish despotism, see George, *English political caricature*, I, pp. 124–6; BM Sat 3846, 3983, 4035, 4192, 4195, 4241, 4383, 4392, 4436; and 'The three conjurors, a political interlude', in [John Almon, ed.], *The new founding hospital for wit* (London, 1768), pp. 47–63. Such popular interpretations should, of course, be distinguished from more scholarly – and politically conservative – treatments of Magna Carta, such as William Blackstone's *The Great Charter and Charter of the Forest, with other authentic instruments* (Oxford, 1759).

⁵⁰ Richard Hurd to William Mason, 14 Aug. 1758, Hurd, *Early letters*, p. 328; Hurd to Mason, 4 May 1759, *ibid.*, p. 335; [Richard Hurd], *Letters on chivalry and romance* (London, 1762); [idem], *Moral and political dialogues* (London, 1759), pp. 191–7. The *Letters* were originally intended as an appendix to the *Dialogues*: see *idem*, *Early letters*, p. 328 n. 3. See also [Allan Ramsay], *A dialogue on taste* (1755; London, 1762), pp. 39–40; qu. Klinger, *Goths*, p. 94.

imagination, but also ‘the seeds of our excellent Gothic constitution’.⁵¹ For both Percy and Hurd, the continuity of early English literary tradition – manifested above all in the feudal and chivalric ethos of ‘Gothic romance’ – offered a sublimated expression of constitutional continuity that was both politically conservative and socially exclusive. But despite the powerful ideological attractions of Gothic antiquity as an ethno-political foundation for English cultural identity, the radical defence of the ancient constitution and Saxon freedoms increasingly compromised its organising function within an emergent narrative of the nation’s early literary history. As radical constitutionalism assumed a new prominence within English political argument of the 1760s, Percy seized the opportunity to draw his Gothicism scholarship into alignment with the Scotophile, Butite cultural politics of the Moderate party, in opposition to more insular and dissident forms of English patriotism.

III

In March 1764, Percy wrote to his namesake Elizabeth, countess of Northumberland, in the hope that she would consent to become the dedicatee of his forthcoming collection of ancient English poetry. The countess’s acquiescence was rewarded with a dedication (composed by Samuel Johnson) expressing the author’s hope that ‘the barbarous productions of unpolished ages can obtain the approbation of her, who adorns courts by her presence, and diffuses elegance by her example’.⁵² By approaching Elizabeth rather than her husband, the earl of Northumberland, Percy was able to capitalize upon his own modest claim to kinship with the noble Percy family (since the earl had received his title only through marriage). The countess’s aristocratic imprimatur certainly elevated the aspiring clergyman and scholar to a new social prominence, and lent an air of fashionable literary refinement to his collection of old ballads – a genre more traditionally associated with plebeian street literature.⁵³

But in seeking the patronage of the Northumberland family, Percy would undoubtedly also have been aware both of the earl’s reputation for generosity, and of his political connections. Despite his low birth, Northumberland was an experienced and influential royal courtier, who had risen under George III to successive appointments as a privy councillor and lord lieutenant of both Middlesex and Ireland. He also enjoyed an extremely close political connection to Lord Bute, and was thus at the very centre of the storm unleashed by Wilkes and the *North Briton*, which resulted in Bute’s resignation in April 1763. Northumberland retained office under Bute’s successor, George Grenville, but he

⁵¹ Percy to Evan Evans, 23 Apr. 1764, *Correspondence*, p. 84. See also idem, *Five pieces of Runic poetry*, sig. A2r; Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia’s issue: the rise of British literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 500.

⁵² Percy, *Reliques*, I, p. vi; BL Add. MS 32334, fo. 2.

⁵³ David Matthews, *The making of Middle English, 1765–1910* (Minneapolis, 1999), pp. 3–24; Dianne Dugaw, ‘The popular marketing of “old ballads”: the ballad revival and eighteenth-century anti-quarianism reconsidered’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 21 (1987), pp. 71–90.

continued to cultivate a close – at times even clandestine – political and personal association with both George III and Bute.⁵⁴ These loyalties were cemented in 1764 by the marriage of Northumberland's eldest son to Bute's daughter, Lady Anne Stuart, and his admission to George III's private circle of political advisers, the 'king's friends'.⁵⁵

The *Reliques* clearly found an appreciative audience within the Northumberland household, for Percy was quickly appointed as the earl's domestic chaplain and secretary and began mixing with the 'higher Politicians' at Northumberland's levees, and indeed at court.⁵⁶ Such rapid advancement, bestowed by one of Bute's closest political allies, suggests that Percy's new patron would have had some difficulty in recognizing the *Reliques* as a truculent English riposte to the Ossianic productions of Bute's most celebrated literary protégé, James Macpherson. The patriotic Gothicism of the *Reliques* is unmistakable – but it is also studiously diplomatic. Despite his scepticism about the authenticity of the Ossian poems, Percy carefully omitted any discussion of Macpherson in his own collection of 'ancient English' poetry. Indeed, while the work was undoubtedly conceived, in large part, as an expression of English literary patriotism, the *Reliques* is marked just as strongly by Percy's endeavour to reconcile his Gothicist theories of English cultural identity with a Moderate, Butite agenda of Anglo-Scottish cultural rapprochement.

This is most obviously suggested by the surprising number of Scottish ballads included in the *Reliques*. These were collected from a variety of sources, the most important of which was the Edinburgh antiquarian and lawyer Sir David Dalrymple (later Lord Hailes). In the course of an extensive correspondence with Percy, Dalrymple provided several old Scottish ballads for the *Reliques*, and did what he could to correct Percy's attempts at 'Scotifying' some of his English sources.⁵⁷ Dalrymple was also a leading member of the Moderate party, and a founding member of the Edinburgh Select Society. He was thus closely involved with both the militia campaign, and the promotion of Macpherson's Ossianic verse.⁵⁸ Percy was far from ignorant of his correspondent's political sympathies: in a letter of November 1763, he expressed his admiration for Dalrymple's 'just and spirited remarks on the present vile complexion of the times', and further observed, in a clear allusion to the Wilkite onslaught on Bute (and perhaps also to the militia issue), that

⁵⁴ Derek Jarrett, 'The Regency crisis of 1765', *English Historical Review*, 85 (1970), pp. 282–315, at pp. 294–8.

⁵⁵ Pares, *King George III*, pp. 107–8; Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the reign of King George III*, ed. Derek Jarrett (4 vols., New Haven, CT, 2000), II, pp. 51–2.

⁵⁶ Northumberland Letters and Papers, Alnwick Castle, 23/3, fos. 214–15; Cleanth Brooks, ed., *The correspondence of Thomas Percy and Richard Farmer* ([Baton Rouge], LA, 1946), pp. 88, 94; Davis, *Thomas Percy*, p. 145. See also Percy's memoranda books, BL Add. MS 32336, fos. 57v, 58v, 60v, 61v.

⁵⁷ A. F. Falconer, ed., *The correspondence of Thomas Percy and David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes* ([Baton Rouge], LA, 1954), pp. xxi, 65, 68–9; Friedman, *Ballad revival*, pp. 199–200.

⁵⁸ Sher, *Church and university*, pp. 8, 61, 224, 246, 254.

We see with indignation and grief the too-successful impressions made on weak and vulgar minds, by a few vile incendiaries: who hope to repair their own shattered fortunes out of the spoils of their country: – and are ashamed to see the ungrateful, inhospitable returns made to your brave and generous countrymen for the torrents of blood they have so lately spilt in our cause.⁵⁹

Percy's sympathy with the Scottish Moderates is also quite legible in the *Reliques* itself. For if the book's dedication signalled its association with Butite court circles, the ballads relating to the Northumberland family linked the collection to the most celebrated literary production of the Moderates (alongside Ossian): John Home's historical tragedy, *Douglas* (1757). The London prologue to *Douglas* had made much of the alliance between the 'generous rivals' Hotspur and Douglas during the Percy Rebellion, as a way of claiming English sympathies for Home's protagonist.⁶⁰ The *Reliques*, likewise, restages this dynastic relationship in a number of ballads (such as the opening pair, 'Chevy Chase' and 'The Battle of Otterbourne'), which demonstrate the enduring 'rivalship between the two martial families of Percy and Douglas'.⁶¹ And just as *Douglas* tempers its representations of warrior virtue with a powerful plea for peace between 'the sister kingdoms', so the air of studied antiquarian impartiality adopted in Percy's prefatory notes allows him to represent the *Reliques* as a site for the cultural reconciliation of ancient enmities, in which the 'allowable partiality' of both English and Scottish sources is sifted and weighed to produce a judicious, composite, and conciliatory historical perspective.⁶²

Percy's historical essay 'On the Ancient English Minstrels', prefixed to the first volume, displays similar attempts to moderate his Gothicist prejudices. 'Our Saxon ancestors' are given pride of place among 'the nations of Gothic race' in the essay's preliminary genealogy of English song, and the story of King Alfred's courageous infiltration of an invading Danish army while disguised as a minstrel is cited as evidence that 'this profession was held in great reverence among the Saxon tribes'.⁶³ But although primarily concerned to trace the poetic lineage of the Gothic 'skalds', the essay elides the distinction between Celtic and Germanic cultural traditions which Percy had been developing in his private researches, suggesting instead that the English minstrels were 'the genuine successors' of the

⁵⁹ Percy to Dalrymple, 3 Nov. 1763, *Correspondence*, p. 61.

⁶⁰ [John Home], *Douglas: a tragedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden* (London, 1757), sig. A2r (italics reversed); Sher, *Church and university*, pp. 74–93.

⁶¹ Percy, *Reliques*, I, p. 3 (italics reversed). A Wilkite parody of 'Chevy Chase' appeared soon after the *Reliques*, satirizing the dynastic union of Northumberland and Bute, whose place-seeking political alliance was ironically substituted for the martial conflict of Percy and Douglas in the original ballad. See *A new and impartial collection of interesting letters, from the public papers* (2 vols., London, 1767), I, pp. 353–8; also repr. in [Almon], ed., *New foundling hospital*, pp. 82–92; and *The humours of the times* (London, 1771), pp. 108–16.

⁶² [Home], *Douglas*, p. 4; Percy, *Reliques*, I, p. 18 (italics reversed). See also Sher, "'Those Scotch imposters'", p. 56. Percy's notes drew the reader's attention to his inclusion of the balladic source for *Douglas*, 'Gil Morris' (*Reliques*, III, p. 102).

⁶³ Percy, *Reliques*, I, pp. xv, xvi–xvii.

ancient British bards.⁶⁴ He also included the observation that most of the ‘ancient MINSTRELS’ were ‘of the North’, thus leading the genealogy of the English minstrel close to the Scottish borders, if not beyond. Percy’s explanation, that ‘the civilizing of nations has begun from the South: the North would therefore be the last civilized, and the old manners would longest subsist there’, seems to have been provided by Dalrymple, whom Percy thanked for his ‘ingenious solution’ to the problem a few months before embarking upon the essay.⁶⁵ An indeterminate ‘northern’ genealogy for Percy’s Gothic minstrelsy certainly evaded thorny issues of national difference; but it also hinted at a common cultural heritage shared by England and lowland Scotland. This too would have met with the approval of the Moderates, for despite their fascination with Macpherson’s imaginative reconstructions of Celtic antiquity, Robertson and Dalrymple clearly recognized the diffusion of Germanic feudal institutions as an important staging post in the growth of European liberty.⁶⁶ Macpherson himself, from as early as 1763, had begun to qualify his initial distinction between the ‘Germans’ and the ‘ancient Celtæ’, and to identify a common libertarian heritage uniting the Saxon and Celtic peoples.⁶⁷

There is certainly nothing to suggest that Ossian’s supporters were offended by the *Reliques*. A few months after its publication, Percy travelled to Scotland with Northumberland’s younger son. While in Edinburgh, he stayed with Hugh Blair, and his hectic socializing was very much confined to the circle of Moderate literati including William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, John Jardine, and of course Dalrymple. Percy’s time in Edinburgh allowed him to begin research on a new collection of poetry: ‘a selection of the best fugitive old pieces of both Nations’.⁶⁸ He also overcame his private reservations about the authenticity of the Ossian poems, and would go on to praise ‘those beautiful pieces of ERSE POESY’ in the second edition of the *Reliques* (1767).⁶⁹ But if Percy’s hosts had any lingering doubts

⁶⁴ Groom, *Making*, p. 98; Samuel Pegge, ‘Observations on Dr Percy’s account of minstrels among the Saxons’, *Archaeologia: or miscellaneous tracts relating to antiquity*, 2 (1773), pp. 100–6 (read to the Society 29 May 1766); *ibid.*, 3 (1775), p. 310.

⁶⁵ Percy, *Reliques*, I, pp. xxi–xxii; Percy to Dalrymple, 12 Apr. 1764, *Correspondence*, p. 72; Davis, *Thomas Percy*, p. 118. Dalrymple’s side of this correspondence has not survived. Groom reads this section of Percy’s essay rather as an appropriative strategy, a ‘containment of the [Celtic] other’, which must have been ‘most provoking to the Ossianists’. Groom, *Making*, p. 101.

⁶⁶ Kidd, *British identities*, pp. 231–2, 279–84. On the limits of Robertson’s attraction to the martial virtue of the feudal age, see Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of enlightenment: cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 113.

⁶⁷ Macpherson, ‘A dissertation’, pp. iv–v, xiii–xiv; Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s past*, pp. 233–4.

⁶⁸ Percy to Dalrymple, 4 July 1765, *Correspondence*, p. 108. The proposed collection seems to have had a direct political inspiration, since according to Percy’s later comment, ‘I think it might do good in these times of Division and Distraction to show what our ancestors suffered in the State to which some want to reduce us’: Percy to Dalrymple, 23 Aug. 1772, *Correspondence*, p. 123.

⁶⁹ Thomas Percy, *Reliques of ancient English poetry* (2nd edn, 3 vols., London, 1767), I, p. xlv; Davis, *Thomas Percy*, pp. 147–9; BL Add. MS 32336, fo. 75v. Blair subsequently visited Percy both in Northumberland and London: see *ibid.* fos. 82v–83v, 119r–121r. Percy suppressed his comments on the poems of Ossian in the third edition of the *Reliques* (1775), and was later drawn into a public dispute

about the Scotophile, Butite cultural politics informing his collection of ancient English poetry, they would have been dispelled by the *Reliques's* outspoken attack upon Wilkite radicalism.

While Percy opened the first volume of the *Reliques* with balladic glorifications of the Northumberland dynasty, he proposed in the second to return to the very origins of the literary vernacular, and to trace 'the gradual changes of the ENGLISH Language', from around the point at which it 'ceased to be SAXON'.⁷⁰ The recently published *Catalogue of the Harleian collection of manuscripts* (1762) made such an aspiration more credible; but the Harleian catalogue also revealed a rich seam of English political verse from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, expressing a broad hostility to the encroachments of executive authority in terms that frequently appeared both populist and patriotic.⁷¹ The contemporary resonance of such texts was clearly not lost on Percy, who chose to begin the second volume of the *Reliques* with the Harleian political lyric, 'A Song of Lewes' (which he entitled 'Richard of Almaigne').⁷² 'A Song of Lewes' is an English *sirventes*, a satirical celebration of victory, which derides the vanquished forces of Henry III (and more specifically their leader, Richard of Cornwall) after their defeat by Simon de Montfort in 1264. In Percy's hands, however, this sophisticated piece of pro-baronial propaganda is transformed into a demotic 'ancient libel on government', which 'shews that the liberty, assumed by the good people of this realm, of abusing their kings and princes at pleasure, is a privilege of very long standing'.⁷³

The contemporary pertinence of such remarks would have been obvious to Percy's readers, at a time when the freedom of the press, the law of libel, and the constitutional rights of juries, were at the centre of radical protests against the government prosecution of a string of Wilkite booksellers.⁷⁴ But Percy highlighted the political topicality of 'A Song of Lewes' still further with the prominent engraving that he placed at the head of the second volume (Fig. 3). As Percy's explanatory notes make clear, the allegorical scene depicts a satyr, 'emblem of Petulance and Ridicule', trampling upon the head of a royal statue. The king's symbolic decapitation is the result of the attacks of 'Ignorance and Popular Rage', inspired by 'Faction under the masque of Liberty'. The royal image 'stands on a pedestal inscribed *MAGNA CHARTA*, to denote that the rights of the king,

with Ferguson over the circumstances in which he had been persuaded of their authenticity in 1765. See Davis, *Thomas Percy*, pp. 256–9. ⁷⁰ Percy, *Reliques*, II, p. 5 (italics reversed).

⁷¹ John Scattergood, 'Authority and resistance: the political verse', in Susanna Fein, ed., *Studies in the Harley manuscript: the scribes, contents, and social contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo, 2000), pp. 168–9; J. R. Maddicott, 'Poems of social protest in early fourteenth-century England', in W. M. Ormrod, ed., *England in the fourteenth century* (Woodbridge, 1986), pp. 130–44; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: language, literature, and national community, 1290–1340* (Oxford, 1991).

⁷² N. R. Ker, ed., *Facsimile of British Museum MS Harley 2253* (London, 1965), fos. 58v–59r.

⁷³ Percy, *Reliques*, II, pp. 1–2 (italics reversed).

⁷⁴ [Almon], *History of the late minority*, pp. 79–81; [Joseph Towers], *An enquiry into the question, whether juries are, or are not, judges of law* (London, 1764); *British liberties* (London, 1766), pp. xxvii–xxviii, 368–93; *An enquiry into the doctrine lately propagated, concerning libels, warrants, and the seizure of papers* (London, 1764).



Fig. 3. Engraved head-piece to the second volume of Percy's *Reliques* (1765): 'an antique libel on Government ... will give you my sense of our present unhappy divisions', Percy to Dalrymple, *Correspondence*, p. 64 (8 Dec. 1763). By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge. Shelfmark A/G.7.4.

as well as those of the people, are founded on the laws; and that to attack one, is in effect to demolish both'.⁷⁵

The engraving thus suggests a dangerous inversion of Percy's antiquarian sensibilities. For if the title-page of the *Reliques* evokes the mingled pleasures of recuperation and loss, restoration and decay, the antiquarian aesthetics of the ruinous seem potentially ironized by this far more violent representation of iconoclastic historical agency, which threatens to reduce the symbols of royal authority to a distinctly unpicturesque pile of rubble. The subversive potential of the engraving is at least partially contained, however, by an epigraph from John Selden's *Table talk* printed on the facing page:

Though some make slight of LIBELS, yet you may see by them how the wind sits: As take a straw and throw it up into the air, you may see by that, which way the wind is, which you shall not do by casting up a stone. More solid things do not shew the complexion of the times so well as BALLADS and Libels.⁷⁶

While radical polemicists of this period argued that the rights and powers of juries in libel trials – as guaranteed by the celebrated twenty-ninth chapter of the 1225

⁷⁵ Percy, *Reliques*, II, p. 3 (italics reversed).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, II, sig. A4v; John Selden, *Table-talk* (London, 1689), p. 31.

Magna Carta – were the last bulwark against despotic government, Percy's epigraph simultaneously strips libel of substantive political agency, and redescribes it as a historical curiosity, an index of ancient manners, and an object of sceptical enlightened scrutiny.⁷⁷

The *Reliques's* anti-Wilkite agenda would have delighted Percy's friends among the Scottish Moderate literati. But it was certainly not calculated to please English radicals. 'What could possibly induce a gentleman of his sense to convert a collection of old ballads into a political pamphlet?' demanded one indignant correspondent to William Bingley's continuation of the *North Briton*, disgusted by Percy's apparent resolve 'to pay his court to the great, at the expence of honour and understanding'.⁷⁸ This charge was later echoed by the radical antiquary Joseph Ritson, who countered Percy's claim for the 'dignity' of the English minstrelsy with the assertion that the old 'Minstrel-songsters' were in truth the entertainers of the 'common people'.⁷⁹ The *Reliques's* dedication and introductory essay certainly depicted the old English minstrel as a 'privileged character', patronized by kings and nobles within a hierarchical and orderly medieval society.⁸⁰ But if Percy's presentation of 'A Song of Lewes' delineated the chronological boundary of English literary history, the point at which the language 'ceased to be SAXON', it also marked the limits of 'polite' Gothicism, and suggested the growing currency of more libertarian and plebeian representations of English identity, which sought to identify the nation's Saxon forebears with a venerable tradition of resistance to arbitrary government.

In the years following the first publication of the *Reliques*, renewed Wilkite agitation gave widespread currency to this 'historicist and nationalistic' version of radical constitutionalism, setting ancient English liberties in opposition both to the effete, Frenchified ruling classes, and to the persistence of corrupt Scottish influence on the Crown.⁸¹ Radical tracts, anthologies, magazines, and prints of the late 1760s and 1770s popularized the nation's history as an 'inexhaustible mine, out of which political knowledge is brought up', forging a powerful polemical link between historical inquiry and the recovery of ancient rights.⁸² Within this burgeoning popular political culture, identification with the past became an emancipatory political act, for only while the 'spirit of liberty' remained extinguished would its historical 'charters, recognitions and laws, remain a *dead*

⁷⁷ Rea, *English press*, pp. 107–21; Anne Pallister, *Magna Carta: the heritage of liberty* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 59–65. Percy's memoranda books suggest that he retained an active interest in the Wilkes controversy: see BL Add. MS 32336, fos. 116r, 118r; and see also the anti-Wilkite poem presented to Percy by the countess of Waldegrave, BL Add. MS 42711, fo. 155.

⁷⁸ *The North Briton: continued by several hands*, no. 94 (4 Mar. 1769), 1, pp. 577–8.

⁷⁹ [Joseph Ritson], 'Observations on the ancient English minstrels', in *Ancient songs, from the time of King Henry the third, to the Revolution* (London, 1790); see also idem, 'Dissertation on romance and minstrelsy', in *Ancient English metrical romances* (3 vols., London, 1802), 1, p. cliii.

⁸⁰ Percy, *Reliques*, 1, p. xvii.

⁸¹ Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 228 (quotation), pp. 212–18.

⁸² [James Burgh], *Political disquisitions* (3 vols., London, 1774–5), 1, p. vi.

letter'.⁸³ The growing appeal of historical argument within English radical discourse provided the context, and medium, for the further popularization of 'Norman Yoke' theories, on the basis of which 'our Saxon forefathers' were supposed to have been cheated of their liberties by a tyrannical French invader and his arbitrary and illegitimate successors.⁸⁴ Despite their slender documentary foundations, the increasingly vociferous claims of radical Saxonists constituted a serious and continuing polemical challenge to more sophisticated versions of feudal constitutionalism, as well as to the conservative cultural discourse of the Gothic revival. Indeed, the politically contentious character of medieval English history in the later 1760s not only reflected renewed controversy over the nation's constitutional origins; it also exercised a crucial influence on Thomas Warton's foundational narrative of the English literary imagination, in the *History of English poetry*.

IV

By the time the first volume of Warton's *History* appeared in 1774, its author had already spent some twenty years searching libraries, compiling materials, and corresponding with some of the most eminent literary scholars of his age, including Percy, Gray, Johnson, and William Warburton.⁸⁵ The *History of English poetry* was, as a result, not only prodigiously learned, but also unprecedented in its ambition to trace 'the progress of our national poetry, from a rude origin and obscure beginnings, to its perfection in a polished age'.⁸⁶ The enlightened, conjecturalist tone of this description (from the book's preface) does little to disguise the predominantly antiquarian, accretive nature of the text: it was in fact Warton's omnivorous, quasi-anthologistic approach to his subject-matter that made the *History* such an important and influential text in the development of English literary scholarship.⁸⁷ But if Warton has remained, as a result, 'a seminal figure in Britain's discovery of a national poetic tradition', the defining limits of

⁸³ *Political Register*, 1 (Nov. 1767), p. 407. The radical press of this period is suffused with similar sentiments, but for a particularly explicit discussion of the political 'advantages arising from the study of history', see *Freeholder's Magazine*, 1 (Feb. 1770), pp. 264–6.

⁸⁴ [Obadiah Hulme], *An historical essay on the English constitution* (London, 1771), p. 8. See further, Hill, 'Norman Yoke'; H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and property: political ideology in eighteenth-century Britain* (1977; London, 1979), pp. 204–5; and Smith, *Gothic bequest*, pp. 98–102, on the challenge of 'democratic Saxonism' to the alternative, customary, and conservative interpretation of the Norman Yoke developed in Blackstone's *Commentaries*. For a contemporary example of the historical contrast between libertarian 'Gothic' valour and England's pacific, Francophile foreign policy, see [William Bolland], *The free Britons supplemental memorial to the electors of the members of the British parliament* (London, 1770), pp. 57–60.

⁸⁵ David Fairer, 'The origins of Warton's *History of English poetry*', *Review of English Studies*, 32 (1981), pp. 37–63; idem, 'The formation of Warton's *History*', in Warton, *History*, 1, pp. 1–70 (separate pagination).

⁸⁶ Warton, *History*, 1, p. iii.

⁸⁷ René Wellek, *The rise of English literary history* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1941), pp. 166–201; Lawrence Lipking, *The ordering of the arts in eighteenth-century England* (Princeton, NJ, 1970), pp. 352–404; Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), pp. 190–213.

that tradition – its ‘obscure beginnings’ in the eleventh-century – also reflect the broader ideological context in which the work was brought to completion.⁸⁸

Warton’s notebooks dating from the early 1750s indicate a clear interest in establishing a credible genealogy for the English literary imagination that would reach back both to the bardic songs of the ‘ancient Britons’, and to the ‘sacred Hymns, Songs of Victory ... & scripture-stories’ of the Saxons.⁸⁹ He seems even to have planned a series of ‘letters on ancient literature’ that would have provided an overview of the nation’s poetry from the Druids to the Danes. But despite Warton’s obvious fascination with the earliest periods of British literary history, sometime in the 1760s he reconceived the *History* as a ‘*Conspicuous from the Conquest to the Revolution*’, dramatically recasting his starting point to 1066, and thus largely excluding pre-Norman literature from the main body of his text.⁹⁰

It might plausibly be argued that Warton’s developing sense of his material, and his linguistic abilities, ultimately militated against a detailed consideration of Saxon poetry. Yet despite his disparagement of this ‘jejune and intricate subject’ in the *History*’s preface, Warton was thoroughly familiar with the work of Oxford’s leading Anglo-Saxon scholars, such as George Hickes and Humfrey Wanley.⁹¹ The *History* itself shows clear traces of Warton’s Saxonist researches, and a fascination with the ‘sublime and figurative cast of diction’ that Hickes had identified as a peculiar characteristic of septentrional verse.⁹² In fact, Warton’s preface justifies his exclusion of Saxon literature on grounds that are not so much literary, as explicitly – and provocatively – political:

every reader that reflects but for a moment on our political establishment must perceive, that the Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking. Before the Norman accession, which succeeded to the Saxon government, we were an unformed and an unsettled race. That mighty revolution obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, constitution, and public manners, the effects of which have reached modern times. The beginning of these annals seems therefore to be most properly dated from that era, when our national character began to dawn.⁹³

This bald statement of ‘Conquest theory’ is strikingly at odds with the immemorialist commonplaces of eighteenth-century whig thought, which continued to maintain a degree of continuity between Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest

⁸⁸ Fairer, ‘Formation’, 1, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Bodleian Library, MS Dep.d.624, fos. 32v, 31v. There is a full transcription of this passage in Fairer, ‘The origins of Warton’s *History*’, pp. 52–3; see also Bodleian MS Dep.e.281, fos. 23–22.

⁹⁰ Warton to Percy, 4 July 1769, in Thomas Warton, *Correspondence*, ed. David Fairer (Athens, GA, 1995), p. 249.

⁹¹ Clarissa Linaker, *Thomas Warton: a biographical and critical study* ([Urbana], IL, 1916), pp. 202, 230.

⁹² Warton, *History*, 1, sig. d3v; Seth Lerer, *Error and the academic self: the scholarly imagination, medieval to modern* (New York, 2002), p. 75; David Fairer, ‘Anglo-Saxon studies’, in T. H. Ashton, gen. ed., *The history of the University of Oxford* (8 vols., Oxford, 1984–94), v, pp. 826–7. Warton’s notebooks also indicate his reliance upon Hickes: see Bodleian MSS Dep.e.281, fo. 23r; Dep.d.624, fo. 31v.

⁹³ Warton, *History*, 1, p. vi.

periods. Warton's resistance to such conventions was conditioned both by his inherited tory loyalties, and by his profound immersion in seventeenth-century antiquarian literature, which must have further sensitized him to the rival traditions of royalist and tory constitutionalist historiography, represented by scholars such as Spelman, Brady, and Dugdale (some of whose works figure largely in the *History* itself).⁹⁴ Such inclinations clearly had significant consequences for the anterior limits of an as yet unfocused narrative of English literary history, since by insisting that England's literature, language, and constitution were alike transformed after 1066, Warton effectively aligned the origins of the native literary culture with the Anglo-Norman polity.⁹⁵

This might seem to ironize the common assumption of the intrinsically 'Whiggish' proclivities of English literary historiography, even if it does not entirely justify Joseph Ritson's contemptuous dismissal of Warton as 'a thoroughbred Oxonian rory-tory High-churchman'.⁹⁶ But it should also be stressed that the structure of Warton's *History* did not, in this respect, diverge significantly from contemporary pro-ministerial argument, which, in defensive reaction to radical Saxonist argument, was increasingly inclined to the same kinds of Spelmanist, pseudo-Tory readings of the English past that Walpolean court whig apologists had employed in their propaganda battles of the 1730s against 'patriot' Gothicism.⁹⁷ Even the old anti-Walpolean patriot, George Lyttelton, while retaining an attenuated commitment to the ancient constitution, commended the Norman institution of feudal tenures in his *History of Henry the second* (1767–71), and identified the resultant 'Anglo-Norman constitution' with a civilizing 'principle of ... liberty'.⁹⁸ Although Lyttelton's whiggish inclinations would hardly have allowed him to subscribe to Warton's less qualified view of English constitutional history, both writers demonstrate the attractions of Anglo-Norman feudalism, at a time when Gothicism rhetoric, and Saxon ethnic identities, were

⁹⁴ Clarissa Rinaker, 'Thomas Warton: a biographical and critical study', *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 2 (1916), pp. 192–3, 224 (separate pagination). On Warton's toryism, see 'Memoirs of the life and writings of Thomas Warton', in Thomas Warton, *Poetical works* (5th edn, 2 vols., Oxford, 1802), I, p. cvi; and Mason to Warton, 24 Apr. 1777, *Correspondence*, p. 387.

⁹⁵ As Warton was well aware, earlier speculation on the origins of English poetry had tended to privilege the age of Chaucer, and what Pope had termed the 'School of Provence': Bodleian MS Dep.c.547, fo. 39; Warton, *Correspondence*, pp. 165–6; Terry, *Poetry*, pp. 103–7.

⁹⁶ [Joseph Ritson], *Observations on the first three volumes of the history of English poetry* (London, 1782), p. 12.

⁹⁷ Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 259–60; Isaac Kramnick, 'Augustan politics and English historiography: the debate on the English past, 1730–1735', *History and Theory*, 6 (1967), pp. 33–56; *An essay on the constitution of England* (London, 1765), pp. 7–8, 11; Oliver Goldsmith, *The history of England, from the earliest times to the death of George II* (4 vols., London, 1771), I, pp. 135, 149–51, 332; Francis Maseres, 'A view of the ancient constitution of the English parliament', *Archaeologia*, 2 (1773), pp. 301–40 (read at the Society of Antiquaries, Apr.–May, 1772). See also Robert Chambers, *A course of lectures on the English law delivered at the University of Oxford, 1767–1773*, ed. Thomas M. Curley, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1986), I, pp. 95–114, 127–36.

⁹⁸ George Lord Lyttelton, *History of the life of King Henry the second, and of the age in which he lived* (4 vols., London, 1767–71), II, pp. 188–208; I, p. 158; See also Robert Chambers, *A course of lectures*, I, pp. 95–114, 127–36; Peardon, *Transition*, p. 129.

increasingly being co-opted by the radical Norman Yoke arguments of Hulme and Macaulay.⁹⁹

The *History* does offer some concessions to Saxonist prejudice: the pre-Conquest Saxon language, for example, is characterized by ‘perspicuity, strength, and harmony’, in contrast both to its ‘Norman Saxon’ corruptions, and to ‘the French imported by the Conqueror and his people, [which] was a confused jargon of Teutonic, Gaulish, and vitiated Latin’. And Warton’s narrative remained entirely compatible with the traditional historical representation of William as a tyrant (upon which both Tories and Whigs could agree).¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the determining structure of the *History*’s first volume traces a narrative arc that systematically delineates the supersession of an enervated Saxon song culture by Anglo-Norman cultural innovation.

The initial sections of the *History* survey an eclectic collection of homilies, odes, religious poems, love songs, satires, and romances, which illustrate a process of linguistic accommodation to the Conquest, and the emergence of the English language from the ‘barbarism and obscurity’ of ‘Norman Saxon’.¹⁰¹ In the process, Warton identifies Francophone courtly society as the principal source of the English minstrelsy:

When we consider the feudal manners, and the magnificence of our Norman ancestors, their love of military glory, the enthusiasm with which they engaged in crusades, and the wonders to which they must have been familiarised from those eastern enterprises we naturally suppose ... that their retinues abounded with minstrels and harpers, and that their chief entertainment was to listen to the recital of romantic and martial adventures.

Despite such speculations, Warton confessed to being ‘much disappointed’ in his quest for the earliest ‘old heroic songs’ of the Anglo-Norman court; indeed, vernacular metrical romance only fitfully entered the literary record with the Harleian version of *King Horn*, which Warton roughly dated to the late thirteenth century.¹⁰²

However, the same manuscript source also suggested disturbing evidence of residual native resistance to ‘our Norman ancestors’ and their Angevin successors. Warton followed Percy in presenting the Harleian ‘Song of Lewes’, as a ‘satirical song, or ballad’ which, in exulting over de Montfort’s defeat of royalist forces, reflected a regrettable spirit of discord between Henry III and his people.¹⁰³ Warton claimed to have come across the piece independently, but the poem’s significance as one of the earliest extant English lyrics, together with its implicitly anti-monarchical sentiments, had by now given it some notoriety within scholarly

⁹⁹ Warton’s brother, Joseph (an important literary scholar in his own right), assisted Lyttelton with the revision of part of his *History*. See John Wooll, *Biographical memoirs of the late Revd Joseph Warton, D.D.* (London, 1806), p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ Warton, *History*, I, p. 2. See also Warton’s official odes (as poet laureate) of the late 1780s, which contrast ‘Norman tyranny’ with the ‘Arts and Manners’ that the Conquest transplanted to England: Warton, *Poetical works*, II, pp. 116, 127–8.

¹⁰¹ Warton, *History*, I, p. 43.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, I, pp. 31–2; Johnston, *Enchanted ground: the study of medieval romance in the eighteenth century* (London, 1964), p. 111.

¹⁰³ Warton, *History*, I, p. 43.

circles. In 1766, in the aftermath of the Wilkes prosecutions, Daines Barrington (the vice-president of the Society of Antiquaries, and the brother of the Secretary at War) cited 'A Song of Lewes' as evidence of the dangerous spirit of insurrection that had supposedly precipitated a thirteenth-century statute against seditious libel.¹⁰⁴ The ideological import of the Harleian poems was only intensified by the increasingly politicized character of Plantagenet history in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Radical polemic of this period drew repeated parallels between the barons' imposition of the 'Great Charter', and the modern struggle against ministerial corruption. The reign of Henry III occupied a prominent place within this radicalized version of English political history. As an apostate to the cause of liberty, and persecutor of the freedom-loving barons, Henry was forced to renew the Charters only after 'many mortifications from his parliament and people' – a reluctance that radicals explicitly compared with George III's indifference to Wilkite petitions and remonstrances.¹⁰⁵ This context is clearly signalled in Warton's discussion of 'A Song of Lewes', which identifies the anti-monarchical 'popular rhymes' littering the Harleian manuscript as evidence that the spirit of rebellion under the Plantagenets 'was growing to an extravagance which deserved to be checked'.¹⁰⁶

Warton's subsequent discussion of post-Conquest English culture returns to the Harleian collection for further evidence of a vulgar, unruly English populace, whose prejudices and politics bore a barely disguised resemblance to eighteenth-century Wilkite radicalism. Warton noted 'political ballads' against taxes and Scots, and quoted an early fourteenth-century Harleian lyric, 'The Flemish insurrection', as evidence of plebeian Francophobia. 'The licentiousness of their rude manners was perpetually breaking out in these popular pasquins,' Warton remarked sardonically, 'although this species of petulance usually belongs to more polished times'.¹⁰⁷ This representation of a popular, politicized literature of resistance allowed Warton to differentiate the true stream of English literary history from more dissident, plebeian expressions of national identity. For while the licentious English populace indulged in 'political ballads' against their rulers, the Anglo-Norman court was apparently preoccupied with cultivating the far more sophisticated and significant poetic tradition of medieval romance.

The growing interest in the romance genre among eighteenth-century English critics was initially stimulated by scholarly inquiry into the literary sources of

¹⁰⁴ [Daines Barrington], *Observations on the statutes, chiefly the most ancient* (London, 1766), pp. 57–9 (3 Edw. I, 1272, cap. xxxiv). See also the attack on the 'wicked spirit of libelling' by the Grenvillite and prominent member of the Society of Antiquaries, Charles Lyttelton, bishop of Carlisle, *A sermon preached before the lords spiritual and temporal ... January 30, 1765* (London, 1765), p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ 'The triumverate or Britania [*sic*] in distress' (1769), BM Sat 4298 (quotation); see also *A guide to the knowledge of the rights and privileges of Englishmen* (London, 1771), sigs. Agr–v, B1r–C6r; [Hulme], *Historical essay*, pp. 67–8; *A complete collection of the lords' protests, from the first upon record, in the reign of Henry III* (2 vols., London, 1767), 1, pp. 48–51.

¹⁰⁶ Warton, *History*, 1, p. 46.
¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 58. Ritson later reprinted these lyrics, in a rather less pejorative context, in his *Ancient songs*, 1, pp. 5–24; see also [idem], 'A historical essay on the origin and progress of national song', in *A select collection of English song* (3 vols., London, 1783), 1, p. xlvi.

Elizabethan poetry, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in particular.¹⁰⁸ The elegant concision of Hurd's *Letters on chivalry and romance* did much to popularize the subject, and to create an audience for the more substantial discussions of Percy and Warton. But although Hurd's rehabilitation of 'Gothic romance' proceeds via a scornful attack on French neoclassical poetics, it would be misguided to conclude, on this basis, that English literary Gothicism functioned as a cultural expression of patriotic Francophobia.¹⁰⁹ On the contrary, the main current of romance studies in this period was increasingly receptive to the French origins of medieval English romance, and to the common political and cultural heritage that this might imply. Moreover, such inclinations remained entirely compatible with contemporary Continental variants of Gothicism political ideology. The medieval scholarship of the French *Académie des Inscriptions*, for example, not only provided British audiences with an exhaustive and compelling historical recreation of the romantic world of medieval chivalry, it also thereby created a sympathetic cultural context for France's ancient feudal constitution, and a refurbished *thèse nobilaire*.¹¹⁰

The medievalist researches of the *Académie*, and of La Curne de Ste Palaye in particular, were extremely useful to Scottish Enlightenment historians such as the Moderate William Robertson, who acknowledged his debt to Ste Palaye's *Memoirs of ancient chivalry* in his 'View of the Progress of Society in Europe' (1769).¹¹¹ But the work of French *érudits* also exerted an important influence upon English literary scholars, including Percy, Warton, and indeed Hurd. In the course of the 1760s, as popular Francophobia converged with Wilkite polemic and radical Saxonism, English literary scholars were increasingly inclined to use the discussion of ancient metrical romance, and chivalric manners, as a way of stressing the common cultural ties between the two nations.¹¹² The second edition of Percy's *Reliques* (1767), for example, displays a much greater reliance upon French scholarly sources, and identifies a common 'Gothic' ancestry for both 'the French and English Minstrels'. According to Percy, 'we can easily trace the descent of the French and English Romances of Chivalry from the Northern Sagas', for 'a propensity to this kind of fiction prevailed among all the Gothic

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1754; rev. edn, 2 vols., London, 1762), I, pp. 17–65; Johnston, *Enchanted ground*, p. 62; Terry, *Poetry*, pp. 288–96.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Newman, *Rise of English nationalism*, pp. 109–11.

¹¹⁰ Franklin L. Ford, *Robe and sword: the regrouping of the French aristocracy after Louis XIV* (1953; Cambridge, MA, 1962), pp. 233, 245; Kidd, *British identities*, pp. 239–42; La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie; considérée comme un établissement politique et militaire* (2 vols., Paris, 1759), I, pp. 67–9; Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the ideologies of the Enlightenment: the world and work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore, 1968); Chantall Grell, *L'histoire entre érudition et philosophie: étude sur la connaissance historique à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris, 1993), pp. 236–43.

¹¹¹ William Robertson, *The history of the reign of Charles V* (3 vols., London, 1769), I, pp. 69–72, 320–1. Here Robertson gives the 'spirit of chivalry' a decisive role in spreading 'sentiments more liberal and generous' among the nobility. See also J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion* (4 vols. so far, Cambridge, 1999–), II: *Narratives of civil government*, p. 281.

¹¹² On the connections between popular Francophobia and English radical discourse, see Colley, 'Radical patriotism', p. 173; Newman, *Rise of English nationalism*, pp. 74–7; Wilson, *Sense of the people*, pp. 178–205; Robin Eagles, *Francophilia in English society, 1748–1815* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 17.

nations'.¹¹³ By 1770, Percy was giving pride of place among the 'Teutonic nations' to the Normans (as the earl of Northumberland's 'noble predecessors') in the dedication to his *Northern antiquities*.¹¹⁴

This tendency reached its culminating expression in Warton's *History*, which was heavily indebted to the scholarship of both Claude Fauchet and Ste Palaye, 'whose researches ... have opened a new and extensive field of information concerning the manners, institutions, and literature of the feudal ages'.¹¹⁵ Warton, like Percy, seized upon the work of the *Académie* as a way of eluding the ideologically contentious implications of narrowly Saxonist forms of English patriot historiography, while redefining Gothic taste in Francophile and aristocratic terms, as the imaginative expression of the Anglo-Norman feudal settlement. The resultant narrative of English cultural identity was underwritten, in the first volume of the *History*, by an ambitious preliminary dissertation 'Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe'. Here Warton described the gradual diffusion of the Gothic imagination through Europe and Asia, which culminated in the invasion of France, in the tenth century, by 'the Normans, or NORTHERN-MEN, an army of adventurers from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden', bringing with them their romantic 'northern fictions'.¹¹⁶ At this point, septentrional Gothic genius (with its deep Asiatic roots) was ready to converge with the 'more splendid' Arabian fictions communicated by the Moorish invasion of Spain, together with the productions of the Provençal troubadours: a conjunction that brought the genre of Gothic romance to its creative apogee in the age of the Crusades.¹¹⁷

In Warton's hands, therefore, the crucible of the European literary imagination shifted decisively away from both the rude sublimity of Saxon verse, and the sentimental primitivism of Ossianic epic, both of which became, by implication, literary backwaters of European antiquity in comparison to the sophisticated feudal societies of high medieval France and England. The 'sumptuous, extensive, and lasting' character of the French feudal system in the post-Conquest era found an equally sophisticated literary expression in the fictions of chivalric romance, which provided Warton with 'an image of the manners, customs, mode of life, and favourite amusements, which now prevailed, not only in France but in England, accompanied with all the decorations which fancy could invent, and recommended by the graces of romantic fiction'.¹¹⁸ French romance, however, continued to possess 'a superiority over the English, not only in the number but in the excellence of those compositions'.¹¹⁹ Only gradually thereafter did the native literary tradition differentiate itself from its parent stock, before finding distinctive

¹¹³ Percy, *Reliques*, 2nd edn, I, p. lxvi; III, pp. vii, x. Percy had already noted the Norman-French derivation of the word 'minstrel' in the first edition: *Reliques* (1765), I, p. xv. He received a copy of Sainte-Palaye's *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie* from Thomas Warton in 1763; see Warton, *Correspondence*, p. 152.

¹¹⁵ Warton, *History*, I, p. 149.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, sig. g4r; see also Warton's draft history of the Goths, Bodleian MS Dep.d.618, fos. 1-9.

¹¹⁷ Warton, *History*, I, sig. g4v.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 149.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 146.

expression in the works of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare. Warton's foundational narrative of the English poetic imagination thus marginalized the imaginative sublimity and demotic vigour of Anglo-Saxon culture – with its increasingly libertarian and radicalized associations – while describing the true stream of the nation's literary tradition as the product of a complex *entrelacement* with the aristocratic culture of medieval French feudalism.

V

How then should we understand the emergence of English literary historiography in the later eighteenth century, in relation to contemporary discourses of national identity? The scholarly rediscovery of the 'literary and folkloric' components of the vernacular culture is often represented as an important staging post in the emergence of fully-fledged nationalist ideologies.¹²⁰ And it is certainly possible to identify a whole range of literary productions of the mid-eighteenth-century, from Johnson's lexicography to Percy's *Reliques*, as evidence for the emergence of a distinctively English form of 'cultural nationalism' in this period.¹²¹ Yet a number of recent commentators have also suggested that, at least prior to the later nineteenth century, the capacity of the vernacular literary canon to function as a defining expression of 'Englishness' was subordinated to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of English literature, as a vehicle for the ideological containment of linguistic, ethnic, and national difference within an expanding imperial state.¹²² This latter argument can draw strength from the broader presumption that nascent British and imperial solidarities exerted a kind of centrifugal pull on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English society, inhibiting the historical development of a distinctive national identity.¹²³ Hence the alacrity with which many English writers absorbed, and refashioned, the imaginative products of Celtic revivalism reflects the fact that, '[t]o the degree that England becomes the centre of the empire, its own internal sense of culture accordingly fails to develop'.¹²⁴

Such claims are clearly pertinent to the present argument, insofar as the patriotic or proto-nationalist inspiration for early English literary scholarship was

¹²⁰ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 12. This assumption unites some otherwise highly divergent accounts of nationalist movements: see, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (1983; rev. edn, London, 1991), pp. 71–5; and Anthony Smith, *National identity* (Harmondsworth, 1991), pp. 91–8.

¹²¹ Newman, *Rise of English nationalism*, pp. 109–20.

¹²² Robert Crawford, *Devolving English literature* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 16–44; idem, ed., *The Scottish invention of English literature* (Cambridge, 1998); Janet Sorensen, *The grammar of empire in eighteenth-century British writing* (Cambridge, 2000); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (New York, 1989).

¹²³ The most uncompromising – and at times tendentious – statement of this position is to be found in Krishan Kumar, *The making of English national identity* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 175–87. For more localized, and more nuanced, argument, see Colley, *Britons*; and Tom Nairn, *The break-up of Britain* (1977; London, 1981), pp. 256–305. The extent to which a sense of 'imperial' identity was in fact available to nineteenth-century Britons is critically explored by Bernard Porter in *The absent-minded imperialists: empire, society and culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

¹²⁴ Trumpener, *Bardic nationalism*, pp. 15–16 (quotation). See also Weinbrot, *Britannia's issue*.

so frequently qualified by an insistence upon the larger British, and indeed Continental, sources of the 'native' poetic tradition. However, I have also suggested that this was not so much the consequence of a larger 'failure' of English nationalism, as a product of the contemporary politicization of British identities, and the ideological mobility of Gothickist discourse. The alignment of radical constitutionalism and popular patriotism, so characteristic of the Wilkite moment, was not sustained in the same form, or degree, beyond the American and French revolutions.¹²⁵ But the strength of radical patriotism in this earlier period cannot, as a consequence, simply be dismissed as the pre-political expression of 'native English xenophobia'.¹²⁶ On the contrary, it was informed by a widespread and deep-rooted sense of the venerable antiquity of England's government and laws, which continued to shape both historical and political argument until well into the nineteenth century. Certain elements of the nation's Anglo-Saxon past, such as the reign of King Alfred, could be reclaimed for the purposes of patriotic conservatism with relatively little difficulty, but such appropriations co-existed uneasily with the residual radical implications of ancient Saxon liberties, and the persistence of a constitutionalist idiom within reformist political argument.¹²⁷ The tendency of Gothickist literary scholarship towards a broader preoccupation with Europe's 'old north', and its corresponding failure to cohere into a distinctive and compelling form of English cultural nationalism, might then be attributed precisely to the survival of the ancient constitution, and Gothic liberties, as consequential and contentious elements of English *political* history.¹²⁸

In this respect, the scholarly recuperation of ancient Celtic poetry, in the same period, provides an instructive point of comparison. For while bardic revivalism claimed to preserve 'the vital soul of the nation', it remained largely outside the penumbra of constitutional and political argument.¹²⁹ In the work of Catholic scholars such as Charles O'Connor, it is true, the government and laws of Irish antiquity played an important role in the patriotic rehabilitation of Gaelic

¹²⁵ The decline of English radical patriotism and Saxonism is traced in Hill, 'Norman Yoke'; and Colley, 'Radical patriotism', pp. 176–84. ¹²⁶ Kumar, *Making of English national identity* (quotation).

¹²⁷ On the cultural uses of the Anglo-Saxon past, and the cult of Alfred, see Billie Melman, 'Claiming the nation's past: the invention of an Anglo-Saxon tradition', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (1991), pp. 575–95; Roberta Frank, 'The search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 75 (1993), pp. 11–36, at pp. 22–4; and Lynda Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes? Alfred the Great and the Romantic national epic', in Donald G. Scragg and Carole Weinberg, eds., *Literary appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the thirteenth to the twentieth century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 138–56.

¹²⁸ Ross, *Norse muse*; Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: inventing the old north in nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2000). On the survival and adaptation of ancient constitutionalism and Gothic identities within whig and radical discourse see, respectively, J. W. Burrow, *A liberal descent: Victorian historians and the English past* (Cambridge, 1981); and James Epstein, *Radical expression: political language, ritual, and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 3–28. The present argument might appear to substantiate Tim Blanning's recent remarks on the necessity of distinguishing 'political' and 'cultural' expressions of national identity: see his *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 16–17.

¹²⁹ Charlotte Brooke, *Reliques of Irish poetry* (Dublin, 1789), p. iv (quotation).

civilization. But the ‘glimmering lights of tradition’ (in the telling phrase of another Irish antiquarian) could throw only a partial and highly speculative light on the forms of ancient government.¹³⁰ The political institutions of Irish antiquity thus remained, as Colin Kidd has argued, largely subordinated to ‘the vindication of Irish culture’ and the celebration of ancient toleration and learning under the aegis of the bard.¹³¹ A broadly comparable orientation characterized the bardic revival in Wales, albeit in a more consistently loyalist and Protestant vein. In Scotland, meanwhile, the songs of Ossian yielded a dehistoricized and semi-mythic version of the ancient highland past that was far better suited to enlightened, quasi-sociological methods of ‘conjectural’ analysis, than to the discredited claims of Scottish constitutionalist scholarship.¹³² In each case, therefore, Celtic revivalism offered a version of cultural identity that was effectively decoupled from the prescriptive authority of historical rights and freedoms.

This ‘depoliticized patriotism’ allowed bardic prehistory to flourish as a usable past not only in Britain’s Celtic peripheries, but also within England itself.¹³³ Despite the residual force of English Scotophobic and anti-jacobite sentiment, bardic primitivism was soon co-opted into a diffuse form of cultural Celtophilia, which complemented rather than subverted the resolutely Gothicism orientation of much English (and indeed Scottish) political and constitutional argument.¹³⁴ But while an accommodation of this kind was peculiarly congenial to the diffusion of ideologically emollient varieties of bardic Celtophilia, rival attempts to establish the remote septentrional origins of English literary tradition stood in a far closer, and potentially more compromised, relationship to the political discourses of ancient liberty and the Gothic law.

This circumstance was certainly mitigated by the ongoing disciplinary consolidation of English literary studies, which gradually divorced the vernacular canon from the increasingly professionalized fields of Anglo-Saxon and Old English philology.¹³⁵ But perhaps more importantly, English literary historiography was also marked out from more narrowly political and institutional accounts

¹³⁰ Joseph C. Walker, *Historical memoirs of the Irish bards* (London, 1776), p. 2.

¹³¹ Kidd, ‘Gaelic antiquity’, p. 1202. See also O’Halloran, *Golden ages*, pp. 184–5; idem, ‘“The island of saints and scholars”’: views of the early church and sectarian politics in late-eighteenth century Ireland’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 5 (1990), pp. 9–11; [Charles O’Conor], *Dissertations on the ancient history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1753), pp. 35–72; Sylvester O’Halloran, *A general history of Ireland, from the earliest accounts to the close of the twelfth century* (2 vols., London, 1778), 1, pp. 122–7.

¹³² Prys Morgan, ‘From a death to a view: the hunt for the Welsh past in the Romantic period’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 43–100. Ossian’s relationship to Scottish constitutionalist thought is discussed at length in Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s past*, pp. 219–39; but see also Pittock, *Celtic identity*, pp. 35–6.

¹³³ On the ‘depoliticized patriotism’ of late eighteenth-century Celtic revivalism, see S. J. Connolly, ‘Varieties of Britishness: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the Hanoverian state’, in Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer, eds., *Uniting the kingdom? The making of British history* (London, 1995), p. 200.

¹³⁴ Kidd, *British identities*, pp. 75–98.

¹³⁵ Hans Aarsleff, *The study of language in England, 1780–1860* (1967; 2nd edn, Minneapolis, 1983); Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch, eds., *Anglo-Saxon scholarship: the first three centuries* (Boston, MA, 1982).

of the nation's historical identity through its assumed role as an entertaining and instructive index of changing tastes, customs, and conduct. If the poetry of previous ages possessed 'the peculiar merit ... of faithfully recording the features of the times, and of preserving the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners', as Warton had claimed, then its study seemed to require a historicizing circumspection that, while congenial in many respects to the post-Burkean sensibilities of 'evolutionary' whiggism, was also antipathetic to the urgently prescriptive attitude to the English past that characterized more radical forms of constitutionalist thought.¹³⁶ Historical inquiry into 'the progress of the poetical genius and taste' thus proved particularly compatible with those treatments of early English history which eschewed overtly politicized interpretation in favour of a more sceptical and progressivist orientation.¹³⁷ From this perspective, the growing popularity of literary historiography in the early nineteenth century appears to signal a more general refashioning of English historical identity as a product of the complex, long-term interaction of manners and institutions, in which evolutionary narratives of cultural change and the civilizing process could assume mutually supportive roles.¹³⁸

In the later eighteenth century, however, the relationship between cultural primitivism, national identity, and historical narrative remained far more volatile and problematic. The result, I have suggested, was an enduring ambiguity surrounding the ethno-historical sources of the English literary imagination. Ancient British bards, Gothic skalds, and Anglo-Norman minstrels, all had legitimate claims to represent the archetype of the 'native' English poet. But the valuation and representation of their different historical moments remained freighted with a weight of inherited political meanings and contemporary polemical contexts. The scholarly recovery of the nation's earliest literary history thus came to involve a series of uneasy negotiations with more politicized and refractory representations of the national past, effectively precluding the emergence of a coherent and ideologically consensual account of English literary tradition's 'ancient' originary moment.

¹³⁶ Warton, *History*, I, p. iii. Smith, *Gothic bequest*, pp. 113–26; Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's past*, pp. 123–5; J. G. A. Pocock, 'The varieties of whiggism from Exclusion to reform', in idem, *Virtue, commerce, and history* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 281–94; J. W. Burrow, *Evolution and society: a study in Victorian social theory* (Cambridge, 1966).

¹³⁷ Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (4 vols., London, 1799–1805), IV, p. 374; on the 'whiggish' cast of Turner's *History*, see Burrow, *Liberal descent*, pp. 116–19.

¹³⁸ The rise of literary historiography in the early nineteenth century, and its connection with larger changes in the nature of historical discourse, are traced in Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and sentiment: genres of historical writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). Phillips suggests an alignment between 'literary' and 'conjectural' historical methods, particularly in their shared commitment to the 'decentering' of political narrative, which is of great relevance to the present argument.