

# **Rise, Fall, and Rewriting: The House of Northumberland's Literary**

## **Architecture**

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George R.R. Martin's novel *A Game of Thrones* begins not with the seat of the throne itself, King's Landing in the south of Westeros, but in the North, with the Household of the Starks at their castle of Winterfell, set just south of the Great Wall separating the brutal wildings and the White Walkers from the civilized folk of the seven Kingdoms. In many ways, at least early in the series, readers are invited to identify with the Starks rather than the other households vying for royal power. The Stark family is at the heart of the series. Now, many have recognized the similarities between the topography and political geography of Martin's Westeros and that of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so I am not saying anything new when I point out that the Starks and Winterfell align with the Percy family and their aristocratic seat in Northumberland, which of course encompasses Hadrian's Wall and borders Scotland.

The harshness of the North, the political and geographical precarity of the Starks, their moral centeredness (relatively speaking), and the entitled brutality of the Lannisters in the south are some of the factors that make readers identify with and cheer for the Starks. Many of these same factors also contribute to perceptions of the House of Northumberland and the crown (Lancastrians, Yorks, and Tudors) in the late medieval period. I've opened my discussion with *Game of Thrones* because I believe the popularity of the Starks is based upon what the Earls of Northumberland ultimately represented, which was a consolidation of regional identity around this aristocratic family that was separate from – and even opposed to – the crown. It is a non-

violent resistance to royal hegemony and royal hierarchy, a resistance that uses royal affiliations and royal techniques in order to break away from them. We like the Starks because they are tough and they are underdogs, but also because their regional and familial culture is different from that of King's Landing. I suggest that the Percys were perceived – and perceived themselves – in similar terms. The consolidation of regional identity in opposition to royal hegemony influenced textual production and interpretation in Percy estates, and the Percys seemed to use texts even more than military prowess to establish themselves as, in Alexander Rose's words, Kings in the North.

The influence, actions, and effects of the crown tend to become lynchpins of scholarly work on medieval history and literature, but the study of regional identity in the Middle Ages has not been forgotten. Rob Barrett, for example, recently undertook a study of another border region – Cheshire – and how its literary, social, and legal productions, as well as their physical topography, shaped the region's identity as a unique combination of English and Welsh. Unlike Barrett, I am focusing here not on the county of Northumberland as a whole, but on the role of the Percy family as lords of this region, and how they used both textuality, architecture and pageantry to distinguish themselves as a longtime Northern family not beholden to the changing whims of the changing Kings in the south.

The Percys, whose influence and power in the north of England was strong, were both key supporters of and a potential threat to the crown. The Percys first supported and then revolted against Henry IV, but were reconciled with Henry V and subsequently created Earls. They then had their share of fortune reversals – including temporary imprisonments and loss of title – through latter half of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth, as the Wars of the Roses raged and the Tudors finally claimed the throne. As this period of warfare shifted into the Tudor reigns, the Percys power only increased. According to William Denton's nineteenth century

account, the Earls of Northumberland had at least 5 castles in Northumberland, 9 in Yorkshire, 6 in Cumberland, and several in Wales, all of which included parks and warrens. He also had manors, lands, and mansions in Kent, Sussex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Somerset, and Dorset. The Percys' wealth, their proximity to Scotland, their distance from London, and their vast landholdings, all allowed them to wield considerable influence, making them both a threat to and a significant ally of the crown.

Today we have already heard about the Percys, namely the wall poems found in the estates of Leconfield and Wressle that were then recorded in BL MS Royal 18 D II. In her study of these texts, which she touched upon today, Heather Blatt argues that they "encouraged readers to recognize how the Percy family valued proverbial advice, classical learning, and appreciation for the moral instruction of the musical arts, and to recognize how they decried vices." The transfer of such verses from the walls of Percy estates to a much more mobile context – the pages of a book – invites us not only to see the Percys as morally grounded, but as a family of the book – a family whose estates include and are shaped by the texts they produce. Textuality, morality, and familial legitimacy are thus deeply intertwined in the Percys' fifteenth- and sixteenth-century political construction of themselves as "Kings of the North." Their sense of themselves as rulers of their land – and scholars have pointed out the "territorial inexactness" of regional identifiers such as "land", "country", "place", "the north," "the south" etc - produced ongoing tension with the crown. Here is an abbreviated outline of Percys versus the Crown since Richard II:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Earl: 1341-1408
  - Son was Henry "Hotspur" Percy (1364-1403), who rebelled against Henry IV in the Battle of Shrewsbury
  - Chronicler John Hardyng lived in Hotspur's household
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl: 1393-1455
  - Helped the Percys reconcile with the crown after their rebellion. Served Henry V and VI
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl: 1421-1461
- 4<sup>th</sup> Earl: 1449-1489 (title taken away then returned, Killed during insurrection)
- 5<sup>th</sup> Earl: 1477-1527 (imprisoned by King on trumped up charges)

- 6<sup>th</sup> Earl: 1502-1537 (lived in Wolsey's household, tried to marry Anne Boleyn, ended up having to entrust his lands and money to the king)
- 9<sup>th</sup> Earl (Wizard Earl): 1564-1632. Wild young man to collector, scholar, and philosopher

In particular, we see in the later Percys – the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> here – a pattern of decadent or impulsive living followed by a realization of their fault and a correction of their behaviour. The 5<sup>th</sup> earl, after being a profligate spender and earning the nickname “The Magnificent Earl” pre-1515, became conscious of moderation in all things and urged his son to the same. The Wizard Earl as a young man indulged in “hawks, hounds, horses, dice, cards, apparel, mistresses” but eventually came to understanding that books and learning were a much more “worthy mistress” than any woman. The texts the Percys produced about themselves reinforced this impression of a moral groundedness. I'm focusing here particularly on the period in which the Percys' ascendancy was most pronounced – towards the end of the Wars of the Roses and through Henry VIII's reign, basically the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> earls, with emphasis on the 5<sup>th</sup>. During the Lancastrian/York conflicts, relying upon one's connections with the king could be a risky game. Once the Tudors were in power, with their increasing decadence and profligacy, a house like Northumberland, with its heritage of standing up against corruption and taking moral high grounds, would not necessarily want the royal association. As such, during its ascendancy, the House of Northumberland sought to craft its own familial identity separate from the crown while not making an enemy of the King.

I've used the term “rewriting” in my title because the Percys, from what we can tell of their libraries, were not mere collectors, buying up manuscripts and books to be displayed for visitors. Instead, they expanded upon books, wrote themselves into books, appropriated genres traditionally reserved for kings, and used writers affiliated with the south in order to craft their northern identity. Their consciousness of themselves as northerners was dependent upon their

distinction from the south (and, by implication, the king in the south). They needed the south to establish their own – needed the difference. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that they took the work of recognizable southern authors such as Lydgate, Hardyng, and Skelton and used them to frame northern interests. The Percys' northernness was at the heart of their perception of themselves as moral, as resistant to corruption, as pure. This idea is evident in literature from their region. John Pickering's ballad written during the 1537 Pilgrimage of Grace, which was an insurrection against the crown and its actions in the north, highlights the moral superiority of the north and clearly separates north and south:

The northorne pepull in tyme longe paste  
Haith lytyll beyn Regardyde of the awstrall [southern] nacione  
But now I doo trust, evyn at the Last  
Renowne we shall wyne, to oure holle congregacyon  
Off thes Sothourne herytykes, devode of all virtue  
And them ouer-thorwe; ther faithe Is vntrewe

Later, the poet refers to southerners as "Sothorne turkes perverting oure lawe". The song is careful not to condemn the king, but Cromwell instead. It was incredibly popular, and Pickering was forced to defend himself for writing it. The 6<sup>th</sup> earl's brother Thomas participated in the pilgrimage, and the rebels wanted more Percy support, likely because the House of Northumberland represented the power and independence of the north – a power that could support their resistance to the actions of the King. The rebels went to Wressle and called out "Thousands for a Percy!", although the Earl did not commit to supporting them.

**SLIDE (see end of paper for this)** This slide shows some of the major Percy manuscripts. We have first the literary manuscripts: Royal 18 D II and 18 D V, the Leconfield Chaucer, and Bodleian Library Arch Selden D. 10. All are expensive productions, and 2 of the

four were expanded by the 5<sup>th</sup> earl. He came into possession of Royal 18 D II and Arch Selden D 10 through his father; initially these only contained Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes* and Hardyng's *Chronicle*, respectively. (note how Lydgate was a poet usually affiliated with the crown – specifically the Lancastrians – while Hardyng was part of the Percy household in the early fifteenth century). This interest in preserving and passing down books within the family continues for the Percys, finding its apex in the huge library of the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl, also called the “Wizard Earl”, and his children.

Royal 18 D II is the most famous of these manuscripts, and I have discussed it in previous presentations. Initially commissioned for the king by William Herbert around 1460, and including only the *Troy Book* and the *Siege*, it came to the 4<sup>th</sup> earl via his marriage to Herbert's daughter. The 5<sup>th</sup> earl added Lydgate's *Testament*, inserting it before *Troy* and the *Siege*, then William Cornish's *Treatise between Information & Truth*, Skelton's *On the Death of the Earl of Northumberland*, *Le assemble de dyeus* (discourse between reason and sensuality, attributed to Lydgate), Lydgate's *Verses on the Kings of England*, Foreign royal arms: “*The blasyoure of the arms of kingis*”, William Peiris' *Descent of the Lords Percy* (c. 1516-1523), and the proverbial wall verses I mentioned earlier.

The manuscript's expansion seems designed to focus the book on the Percys themselves instead of the king or William Herbert. The origin of the manuscript as gift from the Herbert family to the King is neatly effaced by the addition of Lydgate's *Testament* before the *Troy Book* with its accompanying presentation picture. Making the *Testament* the first text in the manuscript immediately makes the book as a whole more personal; the *Testament* is Lydgate's confession of his youthful sins and follies and his commitment to live his life in a more Godly way. Such an opening would certainly speak to (or of) the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl's son, whose notorious behavior was a burden for his father.

Following the Testament, the Troy Book and the Siege of Thebes, is court musician William Cornish's "A Treatise Between Truth and Information," composed in 1504 as Cornish's defense of his integrity to Henry VII. Cornish had been beaten and imprisoned by representatives of the king as a consequence of unknown rumors. This treatise was his way of speaking against his unjust treatment and pleads for the reader to be aware of the difference between gossip and truth. Given the fact that both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> earls were imprisoned at one time or another for spurious charges of disloyalty to the King, it is fitting that that 5<sup>th</sup> earl would appropriate Cornish's call for justice for himself by including it in his compilations

John Skelton's lament for the death of the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Northumberland presents the Percys' earldom as deserving of an elegy from a court poet – indeed, a laureate poet. The introduction frames the lament in just such a way:

Skelton Laureat upon the dolorus dethe and mucche lamentable chaunce of the mooste honorable erle of Northumberland/Wayle & wepe & sobbe & sigh fulsore the deadly fate the dolefulle destenny/Of hym that is gone alas withoute restore/Of the blode royall descending nobelly/Whos lordshepe doutles was slayne lamentably thorow treson ageyn hym compassyd & wrought/Trew to his prince in word in dede and thought.

At once, Skelton attributes "blode royall" to the Earl and castigates those who oppose him as treasonous, while also proclaiming that he was "trew to his prince [the King] in word in dede and thought". In other words, Skelton presents the Percys as royal themselves, even as they are loyal to the crown. It is this strange balance of conflicting priorities that characterizes much of the Percys' self-definition.

The *Assembly of the Gods*, or *A Discourse Between Reason and Sensuality*, is a text misattributed to Lydgate. Unfortunately I do not have time to discuss this poem in detail, but it

concerns the anger of Gods who feel they do not receive the proper respect, and the war between allegorical figures like Vice and Virtue and Reason and Sensuality. The situation presented in the first part of the poem recalls, for the intended readers, the Percys' unjust treatment at the hands of the proud Tudors, while the second part may speak to the moral restraint that the young 6<sup>th</sup> earl should be showing and the moderate lifestyle he should live.

In the middle of the Royal compilation is Lydgate's "Verses on the Kings of England", uniquely edited by an opinionated scribe (most like William Peeris, the Percy family secretary who wrote the Percy chronicle). Like several other manuscripts, Royal has several additional stanzas to bring the genealogical line up to the present day, but its version of the poem also includes unique emendations throughout. This genealogy is followed by lists of the heraldic arms of kings – from foreign and mythological, to contemporary/near.

Following the heraldic arms is William Peeris' "Descent of the Lords Percy". This chronicle, and a very similar chronicle in Alnwick MS 79 (probably used as a source by Peeris, if not written by him), are the only two extant English chronicles written about one noble family. Peeris' chronicle is, unfortunately, not very good poetry, nor is it clear history, but it does function as a comparative counterpoint to Lydgate's kings of England chronicle: Peeris' chronicle of the Percys is longer, more detailed, and more laudatory than the chronicle of the Kings of England that precedes it. In Peeris' conclusion to the chronicle, as he is introducing the genealogical cherry on top, so to speak (the 5<sup>th</sup> earl), he emphasizes his lack of bias and then wraps it up by appealing to readers' own logic and intellect, explaining that anyone who contemplates this chronicle carefully will clearly see that the Percys' nobility is natural and just.

SLIDE

The manuscript then concludes with the wall verses, to emphasize morality, moderation, and respect for authority. Heather Blatt has suggested that the relocation of these texts from the



walls to the MS offers the reader a "fantasy of the idealized household, characterized by the moderate lifestyle of labor, education, and self-improvement of the family". Indeed, the very concept of an ordered and moral household is at the heart of the Percy's textual endeavours.

While the Percys clearly were interested in showing their awareness of Lydgate's importance as a court poet, since he shows up in several collections, they were also doubtless conscious of how much of Lydgate's poetry emphasizes the fallibility of those in power. The instability of the kingdom in the late fifteenth century – a history very fresh in the early sixteenth century – would make works such as the *Fall of Princes* seem somewhat prescient. This is a good place to segue to the non-literary texts produced by the Percys – namely, their two household books. Richard Firth Green has demonstrated how the organization of the king's household – the *familia regis* – was echoed in the households of large aristocratic provincial families, and nowhere was this more true than for the Earldom of Northumberland. There are two Northumberland Household Books, the first of which is more widely known. It was first edited by Thomas Percy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it describes in great detail everything about how the Percys' estates were to be run.

SLIDE: First book: "Booke of all he direccions And Orders for kepyng of my lords hous yerely". Second book: "The booke of Allmaner of Orders Concernynge an Erles hous pteignynge to his Gentyllmen Vsshers. And all oyer his Officers of householde" The second Household Book, which was discovered later, provided detailed instructions for major ordinances and ceremonial days that the Earl would host, from the kinds of tablecloths used to the songs the musicians should play to the order in which the food was served. While housekeeping records and correspondence are extant from many other noble families, some in relatively high amounts, such as the Duke of Buckingham and his family, the first Northumberland Household Books are on a different scale, comparable only to Edward IV's *Liber Niger*. Woolgar has pointed out that the noble household "reflected more widely the

stratification in the rest of society". The way the Household Books examine, direct, and justify every aspect of household maintenance reinforces the various hierarchies in place. And these hierarchies were thought of in both moral and spiritual terms, since they are about service and lordship. Mervyn James argues that "Service was honourable, since it involved participation in the earls authority, and the grant of 'his especiall trust and confidence'; natural, because that authority was the keystone of a regional structure of order and governance which also had its place in the body of the kingdom as a whole" (52) In the 5<sup>th</sup> earl's letters we see his awareness of how closely his role aligns with that of the king. SLIDE

So, similar to how the Royal texts equate the Percys with the Crown, the Earls' documenting of themselves in these household books allows them to conceive of their authority as analogous to that of the king. Their records are modelled after a royal document, and the hierarchizing of their household relies on the reciprocal morality of lordship. In the very structure of the household itself, both the echoes of royal models and the emphasis on the pleasure of literature and reading. For example, Rolls of Parliament of 1485 state that there were "Houses called Paradyse and Hell" in the hall of Westminster, and we find a Paradise Chamber in the Percy estates of both Leconfield and Wressle. Leland writes about these chambers years later: SLIDE "I saw in a litle studyng chaumber ther caullid Paradyce the genealogie of the Percys." (Leconfield) "One thing I likid exceedingly yn one of the towers, that was a study caullid Paradyce, wher was a closet in the myddle of 8. squares latisid aboute : and at the toppe of every square was a desk ledgid to set bookes on f cofers withyn them, and these semid as yoinid hard to the toppe of the closet : and yet by pulling one or al wold cum downe, briste highe in rabettes, and serve for deskys to lay bookes on." (Wressle). SLIDE This chamber, which you can see is at the highest and most remote place in the castle, was accessible only from the lord and lady's private chambers. It was also one of the rooms with directions to have a regular fire lit. It

is clear that the Earl valued the experience of reading, as he used the very architecture of his homes to enable it. The name given to these reading chambers – Paradise – at once echoes the Paradise rooms at Westminster, but also reveals the Earl's idealization of these spaces. They bring him peace and quiet, and they also bring him closest to God, one imagines.

Before the 9<sup>th</sup> earl, we do not have records of what was held in the Northumberland libraries, but we do have these records of books that were owned, expanded, or appropriated by them in some way. I hope that this survey of some of their manuscripts reveals the uniquely textual self-representation of the Percys, and their unique valuation of texts themselves during a time when texts were being destroyed and literature devalued.

Percy book list:

**BL Royal MS 18 D II** – Originally *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes* (1460, when William Herbert presented it to the King and the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl acquired it through marriage). The 5<sup>th</sup> earl added Lydgate's *Testament*, William Cornish's *Treatise between Information & Truth*, Skelton's *On the Death of the Earl of Northumberland*, *Le assemble de dyeus*, Lydgate's *Verses on the Kings of England*, Foreign royal arms: "*The blasyoure of the arms of kingis*", William Peiris' *Descent of the Lords Percy (c. 1516-1523)*, Proverbial and moral verses transcribed from the walls and ceilings of the Percys' estates of Leconfield and Wressel.

**BL Royal MS 18 D V** – Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*

**Leconfield Chaucer** – held by 4<sup>th</sup> earl but with the 5<sup>th</sup> earl's coat of arms at the end

**Bodleian Library Arch Selden B.10** – Originally a copy of John Hardyng's *Chronicle* (and Hardyng had long been affiliated with the Percys, even living in Hotspur's household), to which the 5<sup>th</sup> earl added part of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (copied from Wynkyn de Worde's printed edition), as well as Chaucer's short poems "Fortune" and "Truth"

**Alnwick MS 80** – illuminated pedigree roll (c.1460)

**Alnwick MS 79** – another version of the Percy chronicle

**The Northumberland Household Book** – provides every detail about the running of the Northumberland estates, from the firewood required for each room to whether a tenor or a bass sings in the second row in the choir singing at Mass, to how much food and drink every member of the household receives, to the kind of horse each person rides on a given day.

**The Second Northumberland Household Book** – MS Eng. Hist. B. 208.

Mervyn James:

5th earl: "His power was based on the men he appointed as constables of his castles, receivers of his lands and vailiffs and stewards of his lordships, and who also served in his household" (51)

- james describes the relationship between Percy and his various stewards/lords appointed to supervise various of his lands and estates as not merely a financial arrangement but one based on an ideology of service and reciprocity - "good lordship" (sounds like fealty?) (52)

