

Book Reviews

The Man Who Lived Twice

Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558-1640
by H.R. Woudhuysen
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)

Reviewed by Warren Hope. Dr. Hope is author of The Shakespeare Controversy.

We try to organize and understand the past by calling it names. In the nineteenth century, Lewis Henry Morgan, the father of anthropology, came to the conclusion that the past can be divided into three phases—savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Each phase is characterized by the way humanity sustains and perpetuates itself, how it makes livings and lives, organizes work and sex, production and reproduction.

The twentieth century has called the past names based on how humanity “communicates”—a word that has been so widely used and abused that it has the ring of tin. Especially since Marshall McLuhan published his *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), students of history and literature have tended to divide the past into new phases—oral culture, manuscript culture, and print culture, with electronic culture now in the ascendant.

Oral cultures rely on memory and mnemonic devices because there are no written records. Manuscript cultures rely on the limited distribution of handwritten documents, with all their potential for misreadings and errors. Print cultures achieve wide, inexpensive distribution of uniform texts through the invention of movable type and the technological improvements to printing that followed in its wake. Electronic cultures communicate by radio, television, and so on—an instantaneous transmission of images and words. Tolstoy conveyed the soul of electronic culture when he imagined a future dominated by Ghengis Kahn with a telephone.

This new way of calling the past names alters our view of the past. What were once called the Dark Ages became the Middle Ages and are now known as the early medieval period. What was once called the Renaissance is now known as the early modern period. As we have all been repeatedly told, we live in the post-modern period and there are no doubt the hopeful among us who look forward to the day when our time will be christened the early post-modern period. I am in no rush. Progress begins to have the look of taking great strides backwards.

What all of this, of course, implies is that in our time there is more interest in what we call the past than in what our ancestors did and thought. H.R. Woudhuysen is one of the happy few who refuses to give in to this adolescent and egotistic tendency. He is that refreshingly odd bird, a nineteenth century scholar who finds himself operating in the post-modern period. The result is a massive but highly readable compilation of facts and rational speculations on how literature—writing—was preserved and transmitted during the English Renaissance. The sheer labor that went into the making of this book would have made figures of that period think of Hercules.

One sign of this immense labor is that the volume really contains two books in one. Woudhuysen's thesis has the virtue of simplicity. He sets out to show that manuscript or scribal culture continued to flourish longer and was of greater importance in the England of the Renaissance than scholars have realized—despite the presence of the press and its good work. The first half of his book is dedicated to establishing this thesis by showing the vocations—writing master, secretary, scrivener, seller of manuscripts, collector of manuscripts, and so on—that supported this culture and the networks of understanding, the “scribal communities,” that made up this culture.

The second book in the volume is in effect a case study. If manuscript culture continued to flourish well into the age of print, who is a representative writer of that culture and what light does a knowledge of the existence of that culture shed on the representative figure? Woudhuysen's apt answer is Sir Philip Sidney and he proceeds to re-evaluate Sidney as a participant in a scribal or manuscript culture.

When Sidney died of wounds received in battle at Zutphen in the Low Countries and his corpse was accorded a procession of grave pomp and elaborate mourning long after his death, his reputation was fixed. He was a Protestant martyr, a Protestant knight, a courtier, a soldier, and a scholar cut down prematurely in the war against imperial and tyrannical Catholic Spain. The funeral seems to have been arranged by Sidney's father-in-law, Sir Francis Walsingham, the titular head of the Elizabethan secret service, perhaps at the bidding of his master, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to coincide with the execution (or judicial murder, depending on your point of view) of that lingering focal point of Catholic opposition to the reign of Elizabeth, Mary, Queen of Scots.

Sidney was a public figure, a nephew of the Earl of Leicester and a politician who had been entrusted with diplomatic missions and military commands. If he was known as a writer outside of small circles of family and friends—“scribal communities”—it was as the author of a letter to the Queen opposing the proposed French alliance through marriage, a political position that had been reflected in Sidney's famous tennis court quarrel with the Earl of Oxford, when Oxford memorably called the Protestant knight a “pup.”

Woudhuysen accurately provides the context for this sole source of Sidney's public fame as a writer at the time of his death, a fame that supported rather than damaged the image of him established by his politically inspired public funeral:

Sidney's *A letter to Queen Elizabeth* was part of a carefully orchestrated campaign to dissuade the Queen from marriage and to whip up opposition to her suitor the duc d'Alencon. There seems little doubt that Leicester was the figurehead behind the propaganda offensive and that Sidney's letter was intended to circulate initially among courtiers and nobles, while its companion piece Stubbs's *The discoverie* was designed to attract a mass readership. To be effective in the campaign against the Queen's marriage, Sidney's letter had to circulate in fairly large numbers of copies.

But Woudhuysen misses an opportunity here to make clear one of the benefits of staying within the limited bounds of a "scribal community" in merry old England.

Stubbs, who used print "to attract a mass readership," had his writing hand cut off as a reward for his published outspokenness and spent the rest of his days in the household of that noble Protestant, Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, the earliest of Elizabeth's military commanders in the Low Countries. Sidney continued a trusted favorite at court, a promising young man on the make who was rewarded with promotions and posts of honor.

But it was not merely the relative safety, the limited circulation and potential anonymity, of script that made Sidney cling to it, as Woudhuysen convincingly argues:

Sidney's preference for manuscript publication arose from a variety of factors. The first may well have been the result of a fear of the so-called 'stigma of print,' that it was not fitting for the man of his rank to let his works be sold in shops to anyone who could afford to buy them. He was after all writing for personal pleasure rather than in the hope of gaining patronage or of selling his works for profit: he was a courtier, not a hack. A doubt about the final value of what he was doing may have been linked to this. Sidney probably had few anxieties about the literary worth of his writings, but he may have felt he was destined personally and politically for higher and greater things. 'My youth doth waste,' he makes Astrophil say, 'my knowledge brings forth toys.' Was this really the best he could do with his life, which had promised so much?

Precisely. And it was this concern that determined Sidney's posthumous reputation as a writer—perhaps the most interesting part of the long, detailed story Woudhuysen has to tell.

In November, 1586, soon after Sidney's death, Fulke Greville, who worshipped the memory of Sidney and eventually wrote a life of him, wrote a letter to Sir Francis Walsingham that Woudhuysen reproduces and modernizes. The letter alerts Walsingham that Greville has been told by "one Ponsonby, a book binder in Paul's Churchyard," that there were plans afoot to "print Sir Philip Sidney's old *Arcadia*." Ponsonby wondered if the enterprise had the blessing of Walsingham and Sidney's friends. Greville urges Walsingham to not only prevent the printing of the "old *Arcadia*" but also to "make a stay" against a translation of Monsieur du Plessis's book against atheism, "that mercenary book" by Arthur Golding, the translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the uncle of the Earl of Oxford. Greville proposes that a version of *Arcadia* in his possession should instead be carefully printed along with Sidney's translation of the book against atheism and other works—"Bartas his *Semaine*, forty of the Psalms translated into meter." Greville's motive in writing Walsingham is clear: he wants to use print to fix Sidney's image as a writer, that is, he desires "that Sir Philip might have all those religious honours which are worthily due to his life and death."

Greville temporarily got his wish. He, with the help of two others, prepared the manuscript of the new *Arcadia* and saw it through the press. The script of the "old *Arcadia*" did not resurface for about 300 years. Sidney's name was added to the title page of Golding's version of Plessis' book.

But things did not rest there. Gradually, a very different view of Sidney as a writer—and especially as a poet—reached the mass audience through print. His sonnet sequence on an affair with Lady Penelope Rich—*Astrophil and Stella*—was issued in a quarto in 1591, the year after Walsingham's death, with an introduction by Thomas Nashe. And in 1598, a folio that purported to contain Sidney's *Complete Works* was published by Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke, a patron and brilliant literary light of the time, with the help of others. This Folio criticized and corrected the *Arcadia* Greville had issued, added Sidney's *Certain Songs and Sonnets*, expanded the *Astrophil and Stella* sequence, and included other previously unpublished work. It did not, however, print Sidney's "A letter to Queen Elizabeth," virtually the only writing for which Sidney could have been widely known at the time of his death.

Sidney, in 1598, emerged not as a courtier and soldier, a Protestant martyr, but as a Petrarchan poet of real ability and of lasting interest—his sister's version of him, not Walsingham's or Greville's. And it is no doubt as a poet—not as a politician and soldier, the Protestant knight, that Sidney will continue to be remembered. Sidney's own practice, his limiting adherence to "scribal communities," left him virtually unknown and potentially unknowable as a poet at the time of his death. It was his loyal sister's literary interests

and love of his poetry—a love that meant more to her than the “stigma of print”—that allowed her to crack if not topple the state-sponsored image of Sidney that had been erected at the time of his funeral so that he now resides among the English poets:

Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust,
And thou my mind, aspire to higher things.
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust:
Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.
Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might
To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be;
Which breaks the clouds and opens forth the light
That doth both shine and give us sight to see.
O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide
In this small course which birth draws out to death,
And think how evil becometh him to slide
Who seeketh heaven and comes of heavenly breath.
Then farewell, world! thy uttermost I see:
Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

The Thirty-Eighth Play

Shakespeare's Edward the Third: An Early Play Restored to the Canon

Ed. Eric Sams (Yale University Press, 1996)

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Scholars have vigorously debated the question of *Edward the Third's* authorship at least since Edward Capell proposed the likelihood of Shakespearean authorship of the work in 1760. Recently, however, a consensus among scholars regarding the authorship seems to have emerged which suggests that, while *Edward the Third* probably is not entirely a product of Shakespeare's hand, it at least is substantially enough to be his to be considered canonical and worthy of inclusion among a body of thirty-seven (now thirty-eight) plays (inclusive of such enigmatic works as *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*—romances which have achieved Shakespearean attribution that, nonetheless, continue to be disputed as authentically or even pre-eminently Shakespearean by many readers of the Bard).