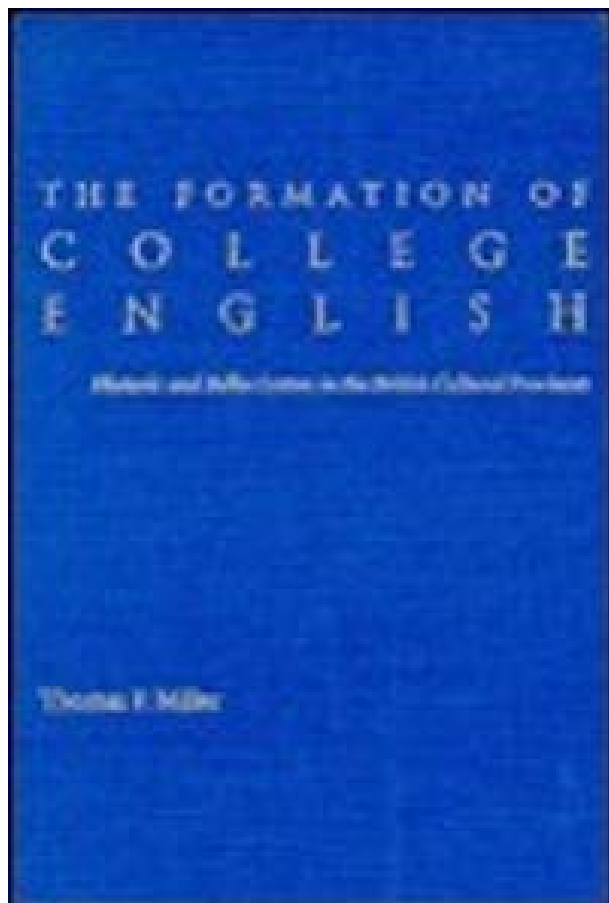


The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces



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In the middle of the eighteenth century, English literature, composition, and rhetoric were introduced almost simultaneously into colleges throughout the British cultural provinces. Professorships of rhetoric and belles lettres were established just as print was expanding the reading public and efforts were being made to standardize educated taste and usage. The provinces saw English studies as a means to upward social mobility through cultural assimilation. In the educational centers of England, however, the introduction of English represented a literacy crisis brought on by provincial institutions that had failed to maintain classical texts and learned languages. In *The Formation of College English*, Thomas P. Miller examines the teaching of introductory English courses in the broadly based colleges rather than as an object of scholarship as taught in the elite institutions. The need to assimilate broad classes of readers shaped how these subjects were first taught in colleges in Ireland, Scotland, America, and academies formed by dissenters forced out of Oxford and Cambridge during the Restoration. This modern equation of English studies with literary studies marked a historical departure from rhetoric's connection to moral philosophy. Within the civic humanist tradition, rhetoric and moral philosophy shared a concern for political discourse and popular values.

Adam Smith and other professors of moral philosophy were among the first to teach courses on rhetoric and

belles lettres that advanced two basic trends: a belletristic tendency to conflate ethics and aesthetics as matters of personal sentiment, and the scientific project of applying Newtonian method to the human psyche and body politic to establish "the science of man". Today, rhetoric and composition have become reestablished in the humanities in American colleges. English studies are being broadly transformed by work with cultural studies, community literacies, and political controversies. Once again, English departments that are defined as departments of literature see these basic writing courses as a sign of a literacy crisis that is undermining the classics of literature. The Formation of College English in its reexamination of the civic concerns of rhetoric and the politics that have shaped college English will shed new light on this process.