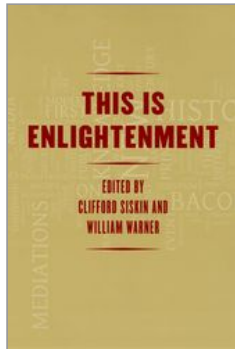


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Print publication date: 2010

Print ISBN-13: 9780226761473

Published to Chicago Scholarship Online: March 2013

DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226761466.001.0001

Mediating Media Past and Present

Toward a Genealogy of “Print Culture” and “Oral Tradition”

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DOI:10.7208/chicago/9780226761466.003.0012

**[–] Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter develops a historical analogy around the perception called “media shift.” Just as twentieth-century studies of oral (as opposed to scribal and print) culture took off in the wake of new twentieth-century oral technologies like telephony, the phonograph, and the radio, so too did the eighteenth-century conceptualization of oral tradition emerge in a complex dialectical relationship with an emerging sense of the sometimes reviled and sometimes improving effects of the steady proliferation of print. The chapter documents the eighteenth century's first draft of the comparative media analysis later conducted in the twentieth century.

*Keywords:* media shift, oral culture, oral technologies, print, media analysis

### Origins of the “Oral-Literate Equation”

In a 1987 conference paper titled “The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind,” Eric A. Havelock looked back over his career and tried to pinpoint a moment when this formula first began to make sense to scholars. He mused, “[G]oing back twenty years, or even less, I do not think that the program of a colloquium of distinguished scholars from five countries would have carried the title ‘Orality and Literacy.’ To be sure, phrases like ‘oral formula’ and ‘oral composition’ in connection with Homer had come into currency at Harvard ... after the Second World War.... because of the close connection of Milman Parry and Albert Lord with that university.” But even then, “the application of these terms was still met with strong resistance from conservative scholars” (Havelock 1991, 11). In Milman Parry’s published doctoral thesis, *L’Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (Paris, 1928), the “founding document of the modern Homeric oralist theory of composition,” was gaining notice in the United States, and in 1951, “the oral-literate question (as it was later to become) received impetus from a very unexpected quarter when Harold Innis published *The Bias of Communication*.” In 1958, Walter Ong published *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, “a preliminary exposure of a problem that was to bear directly upon the oral-literate (p.230) equation but coming this time from the study and practice of rhetoric” Then, in 1962–1963, there appeared to be a “breakthrough”:

Within the space of less than twelve months there appeared four publications that, in retrospect, can be said to have made a joint announcement: that orality (or oralism) had to be put on the map.... These works were *The Gutenberg Galaxy* by McLuhan (1962), *Le pensée sauvage* by Lévi-Strauss (1962), an article by Jack Goody and Ian Watt entitled “The Consequences of Literacy” (1963), and finally *Preface to Plato* by myself (1963) ... Was this grouping as it occurred a pure accident or did it reflect a common and widespread response, even if an unconscious one, in France, England, the United States, and Canada, to a shared experience of a technological revolution in the means of human communication? Radio, not to mention its immediate predecessor, the telephone, and its successor, television, was transforming the reach of the spoken, that is, of the oral, word. (Havelock 1991, 12–15, emphasis added)

In 1967, a few years after this “breakthrough,” Ong himself remarked the way that a relatively sudden awareness of media shift in one generation seemed to trigger groundbreaking insights into parallel historical moments:

Awareness of the succession of media stages and wonder about the meaning of this succession are themselves the product of the succession.... [O]nly as we have entered the electronic stage has man become aware of the profundity of differences, some of which have been before his eyes for thousands of years ... between the old oral culture and the culture initiated with writing and matured with alphabetic type.... As late as the 1930s ... the differences between speech and writing were still impossibly occluded for even the most astute scholars. (Ong 1967, 17–18)

In both Havelock’s and Ong’s accounts of the twentieth-century emergence of the concept of oralism and the heuristic of “orality and literacy,” scholarly efforts to come to terms with the technological revolution of “electronic culture” led to a breakthrough in thinking about “orality” and “oral culture.” Today, Havelock concludes, “the nouns *orality* and *oralism* are on a different footing, symbolizing conceptions that have extended far beyond Homer and the Greeks” (Havelock 1991, 11).<sup>1</sup>

### “print Culture”: Origins of the Term

The same years that Havelock and Ong retrospectively identified as witnessing a “breakthrough” in studies of “orality” and “oral culture,” Marshall McLuhan employed the term “print culture” as one among many similar (p.231) terms (“typographic era,” “Gutenberg era,” “mechanical era,” “electric age,” and so forth) in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962). Particularly striking is the way that McLuhan's use of “print culture” was a self-conscious extension of earlier work on orality by Parry and Lord. He begins *The Gutenberg Galaxy* with the statement:

The present volume is in many respects complementary to *The Singer of Tales* by Albert B. Lord. Professor Lord has continued the work of Milman Parry, whose Homeric studies had led him to consider how oral and written poetry naturally followed diverse patterns and functions.

He states that he will extend this focus on difference, contrasting the “Gutenberg era” with oral, written, and electronic societies: “[T]he enterprise which Milman Parry undertook with reference to the contrasted forms of oral and written poetry is here extended to the *forms* of thought and the organization of experience in society and politics” (McLuhan 1962, 1, emphasis in the original). As the subtitle of his book, “The Making of Typographic Man,” makes clear, McLuhan held that the introduction and spread of printing had profound implications not only for society but also for the human psyche. Five years later, in 1967, McLuhan's student, Ong, would employ the term “typographic culture” as part of an explicitly developed evolutionary model of media shift whose distinct phases include “oral culture,” “scribal culture” “typographic culture,” and the “electronic stage.” Significantly, though, Ong's evolutionary model initially consisted of only three “stages”: “in terms of communications media, cultures can be divided ... into three successive stages: (1) oral or oral-aural (2) script, which reaches critical breakthroughs with the invention first of the alphabet and then later of alphabetic moveable type, and (3) electronic” (Ong 1967, 17). Writing and print were modeled as one “stage.” As late as 1971, Ong was still using the phrase “writing-and-print culture” suggesting that he did not yet see print as a distinct phase but rather as an outgrowth or extension of writing (Ong 2002, 91).

In 1979, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* launched the term “print culture” into common parlance. Today, thirty years later, it seems remarkable that Eisenstein's explanation of her use of this specific term in her eight-hundred-page work consists of a brief remark in the preface and two footnotes in the opening chapter. In the preface, she references McLuhan's work on “print culture,” then states that her own subject is not the consequences of printing in general but “how printing altered *written communications within the Commonwealth of Learning*....the term ‘print culture’ is used throughout this book in a special parochial Western (p.232) sense: to refer to post-Gutenberg developments in the West” (Eisenstein 1979, xiv). In the two footnotes in the main body of the text, she references work by Havelock, Goody, Watt, and Ong on “the distinction between oral and literate cultures.” But she emphasizes that her book focuses on another kind of difference: “despite passing reference to the work of McLuhan and Ong in Goody's introduction, the difference between scribal culture and print culture tends to be blurred by arguments which contrast alphabetic with ideographic writing and oral with written transmission but not script with print” (9, n. 16).<sup>2</sup> In a recent exchange with Adrian Johns, Eisenstein reiterates the original intellectual context of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, again referencing the work of Walter Ong. Responding to a reviewer's charge that her

use of “print culture” in *Printing Press* is “curiously metaphysical,” she writes, “I had used the term quite specifically to contrast diverse procedures employed by scribes and manuscript dealers with those employed by printers—substituting ‘scribal culture’ and ‘print culture’ for the more recondite terms ‘chirographic culture’ and ‘typographic culture,’ used by Walter Ong” (Eisenstein 2002, 88).

Despite immediate and ongoing critique of Eisenstein's thesis, the term and concept of “print culture” are today evoked more than ever by book historians, literary scholars, and media theorists. In a review of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* that appeared almost as soon as the book was published, William Bouwsma acknowledged Eisenstein's work as a major contribution to early modern history yet accused her of taking “the printing press itself entirely out of history. For Eisenstein, print seems to be an independent force in human affairs, a cause but never a result of historical processes. She refuses to see it as a tool, brought into existence and exploited by forces outside itself” (Bouwsma 1979, 1,357). In his 1990 study of the “cultural meaning of printedness” in colonial America, Michael Warner similarly critiques what he labels the “Whig-McLuhanite model of print history”—especially the assumption that “technology has an ontological status prior to culture.” In the work of McLuhan, Eisenstein, and others, he observes, “Print technology is seen as having a logic internal to itself, a logic which then exerts causative force in human affairs” (Warner 1990, xi, 5, 7, 5). Most recently, Adrian Johns has mounted a full-scale critique of Eisenstein's notion of print culture. In his view, Eisenstein's print culture “is characterized primarily in terms of certain traits that print is taken to endow on texts” (especially fixity). But at least until the nineteenth century, “Eisenstein's print culture does not exist.” “Print culture” does not emerge directly from the press; instead, “the very identity of print itself has had to be *made*” (Johns 1998, 10, 19, 2).<sup>3</sup> Today, Eisenstein herself laments that the term print culture is “in danger (p.233) of becoming a meaningless cliché.” In particular, she warns, “‘Eighteenth-Century Print Culture’ is used as an umbrella title to cover miscellaneous topics” (Eisenstein 2002, 88, 88 n. 9). Nonetheless, despite three decades of critique and refinement of the term and concept of print culture, the proliferation of projects and institutions under the rubric of “print culture studies” seems if anything to have intensified. Witness, for instance, the title of a recent valuable collection of essays, *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein* (2007), in a series titled *Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book*.<sup>4</sup>

### If Print Culture Had to Be Made, Who Made It? The Eighteenth Century as Turning Point

Print culture, then, did not just appear with the invention of printing. In Britain, there was a time lag of about three centuries between the introduction of printing technology and the crystallization of anything we can without major qualifications label a “print society.” To make matters still more complicated, the phrase “print culture” is anachronistic for the eighteenth century. No eighteenth-century author employed this phrase (or the corollary “oral culture”) for, as Raymond Williams and others have shown, the word “culture” was not used as a noun signifying “a particular way of life” until the nineteenth century: “Culture as an independent noun, an abstract process or the product of such a process, is not important before 1800 and is not common before 1850” (Williams 1985, 90, 88).<sup>5</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, “culture” took on new and important meanings, but until then, it typically meant “the ‘tending of natural growth,’ and then, by analogy, a process of human training” (Williams 1966, xiv). Many early eighteenth-century authors wrote extensively about the spread of print, and especially, what they took to be the alarming expansion of the press after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. But authors such as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope represent the spread of print

commerce as contributing to a decline of culture in the sense of cultivation. In the judgment of Martinus Scriblerus, Pope's fictional "learned commentator" on his mock-epic poem *The Dunciad*, "Providence ... permitted the invention of Printing as a *scourge* for the sins of the learned"—not as a superior vehicle of learning or tool for the advancement of judgment, morals, or taste (Pope 1999, 70, emphasis added). Nonetheless, while these authors do not employ the term "print culture," they do gesture—satirically—toward this concept.<sup>6</sup> Literary texts are a valuable—if notoriously tricky—register of contemporary awareness of media shift, **(p.234)** and Pope, Swift, and other members of the satiric "Scriblerus Club" exhibit an intense awareness of dramatic contemporary changes happening around them having to do with printing. It is no accident that McLuhan held up *The Dunciad* as one of the "four massive myths of the Gutenberg transformation of society." "It is to *The Dunciad*," he pronounced, "that we must turn for the epic of the printed word....For here is the explicit study of plunging of the human mind into the sludge of an unconscious engendered by the book" (McLuhan 1962, 147, 255).

The early eighteenth century was a decisive transitional period in the history of the British book trade. In 1695, the Printing or Licensing Act of 1662 was allowed to lapse for good, ending prepublication censorship and government and Stationers' Company restrictions on the number of presses, printers, and apprentices. The decades immediately following were a time of anarchic expansion: while the Printing Act had tried to limit the number of master printers in all of England to twenty-four, by 1705 there were between sixty-five and seventy printing houses in London alone (Treadwell 1980, 6).<sup>7</sup> Despite the efforts of the Stationers' Company to regain control of the trade—including a decade of failed attempts to renew the Licensing Act and so protect ancient guild privileges—an older, guild-based model of control was being displaced by a more openly competitive commercial model. This shift is often represented as the demise of a more "gentlemanly" culture of printing, but for the vocal printer-author Elinor James it signaled a decline in the "Art and Mystery" of an ancient craft authorized by the Crown. As James urged in one of her many broadside petitions to Parliament urging renewal of the Licensing Act, "Printing is not a Trade as other Trades are, but it is an Art and Mystery that ought ... not to be made so common, as that it should be slighted and trampled under Foot."<sup>8</sup> For most of James's lifetime (c. 1645–1719), the London book trade was small and closely knit, but by the mid-eighteenth century, the print trade had penetrated into the provinces, and "by 1800, print issued from hundreds of presses operating in London and almost every small town in the country" (Raven 2001, 1). There is no question that printing deeply affected English life between 1450 and 1695, but in the eighteenth century, "printing began to affect the structure of social life at every level." Most important, for the eighteenth-century literary authors I will consider all too briefly next, print was "restructuring rather than merely modifying" the world of letters (Kernan 1987, 48, 9).

### **(p.235)** Pope, Swift, and Print: *The Dunciad* and *A Tale of a Tub*

For twenty-five years after the lapse of the Licensing Act, Elinor James lamented the transformation of the ancient "Art and Mystery" of printing to a mere commercial "Trade." The early eighteenth century also saw the development of a powerful satiric construct of commercial print society. Authors such as Swift and Pope lived through a time of significant, *specific* economic and political reconfigurations of the press, and their perceptions of change are powerfully registered in texts such as *A Tale of a Tub* (partly drafted in 1696–1697; pub. 1704) and *The Dunciad* (1728–1743). While these texts are commonly read as indictments of "print culture," such readings overstate their case.<sup>9</sup> Neither Swift nor Pope was antiprint. Instead, what James McLaverty has observed of Pope might also be said of Swift: we need to acknowledge both "the Pope who loved print and the Pope who hated it" (McLaverty 2001, 1).<sup>10</sup> It was not print technology, the spread of printing, or print per se that was making these authors

feel like an epochal shift had occurred. Rather, there was a sense that what we would call a “technology” was on the brink of being *used* in profoundly new ways. The distinctive self-consciousness of these authors about print and its users makes them (and the other “Scriblerians”) powerful commentators on what we might call media shift. With the collapse of prepublication licensing and Stationers' Company control, there was in these authors' view “no public punishment left, but what a good Writer inflicts” (Pope 1999, 34). Printing and letters were being reduced to mere market-oriented trades without adequate moral, legal, and economic safeguards. One of Swift's key concerns in *A Tale of a Tub* is the religious and political threat of uncontrolled print: “[N]ew levies of wits, all appointed (as there is reason to fear) with pen, ink, and paper, which may at an hour's warning be drawn out into pamphlets and other offensive weapons” to attack church and state (Swift 1999, 18). Swift also satirizes modern methods for coping with the vast overproduction of knowledge—especially indexes, digests, and other tools for navigating and sorting printed books. In “A Digression in Praise of Digressions,” he observes that the would-be wits “of this age have discovered a shorter and more prudent method to become *scholars* and *wits*, without the fatigue of *reading* or of *thinking*....the profounder, and politer method, [is] to get a thorough insight into the *index*, by which the whole book is governed and turned, like *fishes* by the *tail*” (70).<sup>11</sup> In *The Dunciad*, Pope similarly satirizes “shameless, mercenary booksellers,” ill-judging patrons, and the fickle, undiscerning public, but he emphasizes that Dulness affects all sectors of society. McLuhan was not unjustified in describing *The Dunciad* as a “myth ... of the Gutenberg transformation of (p.236) Society,” (McLuhan 1962, 147) for the way that the poem represents the reach and influence of print, especially in book 4, does come close to our modern sense of a culture as a “whole network of social relations” or “total way of life”

In later versions of Pope's poem, certain broad social changes seem to start happening almost as if by themselves. The spread of printing produces something unexpected—though not necessarily inherent in the technology. Print—or rather, new *uses* of print—are contributing to a total, hegemonic takeover of religious, political, educational, and other institutions. But it is not only human agency but also a *lack* of human action due to unawareness or indifference that is triggering these effects. For Pope, the willingness of literate gentlemen to allow themselves to be caught up in the fog of Dulness is at least as much of a problem as too many bad writers. In his reading of the *Dunciad*, Alvin Kernan ascribes to Pope the view of Marshall McLuhan that print ushers in dramatic cognitive, as well as social, shifts: “[T]he kind of mental confusion that McLuhan refers to was, in fact, Pope's central satiric subject” (Kernan 1989, 15). But Augustan poets, I suggest, are not working with abstract concepts like “print logic” or “typographic man.” Pope would never have dreamed of separating the technology of printing from its users. (In fact, his satire was criticized for being too personal.) He used the word “print” chiefly as a verb, not a noun—to indicate a process, not a product.<sup>12</sup> It is not print per se but specific human uses of and responses to print that are the problem. Furthermore, while Pope does associate the spread of print with massive (and possibly even cognitive) shifts, it is not a direct causal relationship, nor is it an inevitable one. Pope was not a technological determinist. *The Dunciad* is at once a topical poem *and* a prophecy of a future that need not necessarily happen. It is up to humane intellectuals to scrutinize and shape the directions of a communications technology; to make what Paul Starr calls “constitutive choices” (Starr 2004, 1–7 and passim).

## The Spread of Print Commerce Triggers Heightened Reflection on Oral Communication

In the twentieth century, attempts by Parry, Lord, Ong and others to understand oral poetry and “oral culture” led to the coining of the term “print culture.” In the eighteenth century, by way of contrast, attempts to theorize the implications of print triggered a distinctly new degree of self-conscious reflection on oral communication and its actual and potential threatening intersections with an unrestrained press. Augustan authors made sense of what seemed to them the new world of print commerce by linking it to familiar **(p.237)** “vulgar” or popular oral practices. In *The Dunciad*, Pope states as the subject of his poem in brief the movement of the “Smithfield Muses” to the “ear of Kings” (Pope 1999, 97, 1: 2). Pope's great “epic of the printed word” (McLuhan 1962, 255) is filled with ears, mouths, and tongues—dangerous bodily organs of sense. In book 2, Queen Dulness commands the dunces to learn “the wondrous powr of Noise.” The mock heroic games held to celebrate the new King of Dulness include a noise-making contest wherein a “thousand tongues are heard in one loud din” (2: 221–268). Similarly, in *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift constructs his satire in opposition not only to the degradations of the literary marketplace (and the threat of uncontrolled print) but also particular oral practices. Throughout the eighteenth century, for instance, dissenting preachers' oral appeal to the masses was an enormous concern. Anglican authors expressed alarm that the populace was being seduced by “enthusiasts”—especially Quakers and Methodists—more cunning in the use of intonation and gesture in public speaking. As a freshly ordained clergyman, Swift knew that at this time of widespread illiteracy, tongues and ears were the chief organs of mass manipulation. In his satire of “corruptions in Religion and Learning,” he foregrounds tongues and ears, as much as books and pamphlets, as powerful organs of sedition and dissent (Swift 1999, 2). Indeed, he depicts so broad a range of human vocal activities—from belching to humming to preaching to droning—that for once the impossibly broad category of “orality” seems to fit, as these practices can't easily be subsumed under any narrower label such as “speech.” Swift's satire reminds us that oral communication is more than a verbal (or even vocal) phenomenon. In his satire of “the learned Aeolists,” who “maintain the original cause of all things to be *wind*,” he depicts a dissenting preacher swollen with inspiration:

In this posture he disembogues whole tempests upon his auditory, as the spirit from beneath gives him utterance, which issuing *ex adytis* and *penetralibus*, is not performed without much pain and gripings. And the wind in breaking forth deals with his face as it does with that of the sea, first *blackening*, then *wrinkling*, and at last *bursting it into a foam*. (Swift 1999, 75, emphasis in original)

Similarly, in *The Dunciad*, Pope satirizes both dissenting preachers and Grub Street authors as braying asses. In the aforementioned noise-making contest, he compares the competitors (“Authors, Stationers”) to “long-ear'd” asses, then compares the asses' music to the “Sound” made by the “labring lungs” of “Enthusiast” preachers—most notably Methodist leader George Whitefield, who was known for his field preaching to enormous crowds **(p.238)** (2: 31; 247–258). Augustan authors do not satirize “print culture” and “orality.” Nevertheless, in works such as *The Dunciad* and *A Tale of a Tub*, Pope and Swift reflect on and register threatening oral practices as part of their extended meditation upon the problems and possibilities of print.

## The Theological Notion of Oral Tradition

In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift satirizes not only “low” oral practices but also the high theological notion of oral tradition. In his allegory of the three brothers, pointedly named Peter, Martin, and Jack, he vehemently rejects the idea of reliable oral tradition as a dangerous Papist hoax. The

1680s saw the intensification of longstanding debates between Protestants and Catholics concerning Scripture versus tradition as a rule of faith. For Anglican authors faced with the prospect of a Catholic king, this was a question of urgent national political importance, “a major war in the history of ideas, in which big guns on both sides were employed” (Walsh 1990, 291). The official position of the Catholic church was that truth was to be found in *both* Scripture and unwritten tradition, but in the tense political context of the 1680s (and the heated environment of polemical debate generally) Catholic polemicists such as English priest John Gother intensified their arguments for the stability and reliability of oral tradition as preserved in the Church versus the uncertainty of textual transmission and interpretation. As one anonymous polemicist remarked in 1685, “of late...*Oral Tradition* has quite carried away *the Credit*” (anon. 1685, A4r).

Throughout the eighteenth century, Anglicans remained deeply suspicious of the proposition that any unwritten tradition preserved by the Church might be considered of equal authority to the Bible. Swift depicts the father of Peter, Martin, and Jack handing his sons his *written will*, providing each brother with an immortal coat (implicitly, the doctrine of Christianity). The will contains “full Instructions” concerning the care of these coats, and the sons observe these instructions, until one day they realize that their coats are out of style: “[T]hey went immediately to consult their father’s Will, read it over and over, but not a word of the *shoulder-knot*” (a fashion trend they wish to follow). “What should they do?” (Swift 1999, 38). When they can’t find passages authorizing shoulder-knots, brother Peter sets his siblings to searching the will for constituent letters (a, b, c, and so on!) that can be reshuffled into passages authorizing any new fashion he wishes to implement. At this point in the text, a footnote by Anglican William Wotton scoffs, “When the Papists cannot find anything which they want in Scripture they go to *Oral Tradition*” (Swift 1999, 39 n.). Later, another footnote (this (p.239) time likely by Swift himself) also scorns the Catholic doctrine of oral tradition: “By this is meant *tradition*, allowed to have equal authority with the scripture, or rather greater” (Swift 1999, 40 n.). Later in life, Swift would revisit the question of oral tradition in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Book 4 depicts a society of virtuous horses, the Houyhnhynms, who pass down valuable customs, learning, and letters via tradition because they have no books. But Swift never seriously entertained the possibility that any complex, valuable body of knowledge could be passed down entirely without writing, and in this way he was typical of his era. His purpose in *Gulliver’s Travels* is “satiric rather than ethnographic” (Hudson 1996b, 165)<sup>13</sup> (these are horses, after all!) and crucially, the Houyhnhynms are not Christians—and so could never be mistaken for Catholics.

### The Crystallization of an Ethnographic Concept of Oral Tradition

Throughout the eighteenth century, the dominant understanding of “oral tradition” remained theological. Around 1730, however, one increasingly sees this phrase used in an ethnographic context. In 1724, two years before *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jesuit missionary Joseph François Lafitau’s *Moeurs des sauvages américains* advanced the enlightened idea that “savages” without writing might nonetheless have a highly developed system of laws, customs, and arts preserved through oral tradition. Lafitau lived among the Iroquois near Montreal from 1712 to 1717, and his modern editors credit him with having founded comparative ethnology.<sup>14</sup> While he never advanced a systematic argument for “oral tradition,” his grounding in Catholic theological notions of tradition may have helped him to move beyond the widespread assumption of European intellectuals that cultures without writing were lawless and barbaric. In the 1730s, classical scholars began cautiously advancing arguments for the possibility of sophisticated oral societies. The eighteenth century would see a major reevaluation of Homeric poetry: a shift from a neoclassical approach, emphasizing what was universal and timeless, to a new interest in the



specific historical circumstances affecting the production of works of art. Increasingly, there was a sense that Homer's poetry belonged to a particular period of social development and that its most puzzling characteristics (such as the repetition of epithets) might be explained if the poetry was understood in its original social, political, and geographical contexts. Primitivists were developing the idea of the relativity of human societies, and in 1735, Edinburgh scholar Thomas Blackwell's *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* linked Homer's art to his "rude society" and its particular stage of development with respect to manners, language, and political and social (p.240) organization. Blackwell never suggested that Homer could not read or write (this would have been a shocking proposition), but he argued that Homer owed the vigorousness of his language to his "primitive" environment. In 1769, the traveler and antiquarian Robert Wood in his *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (1775) explicitly suggested that Homer could not read or write.<sup>15</sup> His proposal was greeted with scorn by many contemporaries, but it was taken seriously by the German classicist F. A. Wolf, whose own *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) would greatly influence Homeric scholarship. Eighteenth-century debates concerning Homer and oral tradition were foundational to modern oral-formulaic theory and to Milman Parry's discovery of the workings of oral-formulaic epithets in Yugoslavian epic poetry. In eighteenth-century Britain, few scholars valorized Homer's "rude and unlettered state of society" to the extent that Jean-Jacques Rous-seau did in his unpublished *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, (c. 1762-1763). As Rousseau famously declared, "other poets had written; Homer alone had sung. And people have always listened in rapture to these songs, even when Europe has been overrun by barbarians who try to judge what they are incapable of experiencing" (Rousseau 1966, 24).<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, classical scholars and other learned gentlemen increasingly exercised nostalgia for "rude societies" before the invention of letters. They especially lamented the decline of what Edinburgh moral philosopher Dugald Stewart would later call "the culture of memory."<sup>17</sup> As Wood mused, "in a rude and unlettered state of society the memory is loaded with nothing that is either useless or unintelligible; whereas modern education employs us chiefly in getting by heart, while we are young, what we forget before we are old" (Wood 1775, 260).

After about 1760, the number of British (especially Scottish) texts advancing arguments for sophisticated oral societies rose dramatically. That year, Highlander James Macpherson began publishing his phenomenally popular Ossianic poetry, claiming to have translated fragments of ancient oral poetry passed down from a third-century Highland bard chiefly by word of mouth. Macpherson was a student at Aberdeen College where Thomas Blackwell was principal; he also came under the influence of rhetorician Hugh Blair, who suggested that preliterate cultures were fertile ground for the growth of impassioned, "epic" language. Macpherson's scandalous claims for a sophisticated bardic tradition of oral poetry were notoriously debated even among his fellow Scots, but they also triggered extensive scholarly research into Celtic cultures, and the Ossian phenomenon raised the question of sophisticated oral societies to the level of a "popular" debate. By the end of the eighteenth century, we see an epochal shift in attitudes toward "oral tradition," and the crystallization of the modern secularized version of this concept.

### (p.241) "Rescuing" the Oral, 1: The Elocution Movement

In their own era of print and perceived rising literacy, eighteenth-century poets, rhetoricians, antiquarians, and others began to rethink and valorize the legacy and power of the human voice (sometimes even "vulgar" voices) in new ways and to model themselves as heroic "rescuers" of valuable oral traditions they depicted as on the brink of being lost. The 1730s onward also saw the flowering of the elocution movement, as a wide variety of entrepreneurs sought to restore ancient eloquence for distinctly modern purposes. Elocutionists such as John "Orator" Henley (d.

1756) or the Irish actor-turned-elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (the father of playwright and renowned parliamentary orator Richard Brinsley Sheridan) made a new commercial opportunity out of what used to be one branch of classical rhetoric. Between 1726 and 1756, Henley operated an oratory above a meat market in the heart of working London where he lectured on elocution to socially diverse audiences. Later in the century, Sheridan lectured at a more polite level to audiences in major urban centers throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland. In their oral/physical performances, Henley, Sheridan, and other elocutionists at once touted and embodied those elements of spoken communication that cannot be fully reproduced in written language (tone, pitch, cadence, and especially, gesture). Sheridan argued that the propagation of writing, print, and even literacy had undermined public speaking skills. In his *Lectures on Elocution* (1762), he proposed that “some of our greatest men have been trying to do that with the pen, which can only be performed by the tongue” (Sheridan 1968, xii). Echoing Sheridan, Hugh Blair held that “though Writing may answer the purposes of mere instruction, yet all the great and high efforts of eloquence must be made, by means of spoken, not of written, Language” (Blair 2005, 74). The eighteenth century saw a renewed fascination with the human body as a powerful (and potentially universal) communications medium: a neglected tool that might beneficially be exploited in a variety of arenas. Elocutionists especially lamented the “decline of pulpit oratory”: the cold restraint of Anglican preachers, and accordingly, the missed opportunities to engage the populace through an impassioned, physical style of preaching. At the same time, though, later eighteenth-century elocutionists such as Sheridan worked hard to distinguish their own genteel oral endeavors from the practices of groups such as the Quakers or the Methodists who were already making powerful use of the same insights. The elocutionists' arguments for the superior expressive power of oral communication might appear to challenge widespread European assumptions about the superiority of writing, but reread in the context **(p.242)** of their own media moment, it becomes clear that Sheridan and his contemporaries, like Pope and Swift earlier in the century, were theorizing oral communication chiefly as a means of grappling with the changing institutional contexts of *print*. “The cheapness of books,” Sheridan observed in 1762 with considerable ambivalence, “has made the art of ... reading familiar to the lowest people” (Sheridan 1968, 247). Eloquence was a new tool of distinction in an increasingly literate age.

“Rescuing” the Oral, 2: The Polite Ballad Revival and Ballad Scholarship

The eighteenth century also saw the emergence of a substantial print discourse about ballads. In commentaries in periodicals, in prefaces to collections of ballads, in essays printed in these collections, and elsewhere, a wide variety of authors commented positively and negatively upon balladry as a hybrid oral and textual practice. In Britain, ballads were closely linked to commercial printing; they were also commonly represented as associated with the “lower sort.” But over the course of the century, the polite ballad revival and especially the rise of ballad scholarship would forge significantly new ways of conceptualizing ballads. In compiling his phenomenally successful anthology *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), clergyman Thomas Percy collected his ballads from print and manuscript sources (including broadsides). But in his ambitious “Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England,” appended to the *Reliques*, he represented the “Old Heroic Ballads” in his collection as the “select remains of our ancient English bards and minstrels”: “oral itinerant poet[s]” who “probably never committed [their rhymes] to writing.” The descendents of these noble old bards, he speculated, were tragically displaced by “an inferior sort” of “ballad-writers. for the press” (Percy 1966, preface 1: 7; appendix 1: 348, 380). By the 1780s, one detects the crystallization of a new *confrontational* model of balladry, whereby an earlier, more “authentic” tradition of “minstrel song” is seen as having been displaced by commercial print.<sup>18</sup> In 1781, twenty-three-year-old John Pinkerton left his native Edinburgh for London to publish his own collection, *Scottish Tragic Ballads*. Energized by his readings of Percy and Macpherson and indebted to Blair's argument for the virtues of “oral tradition” in his “Critical Dissertation Upon the Poems of Ossian” (1763), Pinkerton prefaced his collection with a “Dissertation on the Oral Tradition of Poetry” in which he aspired to give an “account of the utility of the Oral Tradition of Poetry, in that barbarous state of society which necessarily precedes (p.243) the invention of letters” (Pinkerton 1781, ix-xxvii, x, emphasis added). Whereas Percy had only gestured toward an evolutionary model of media shift (the idea of a shift “from” oral “to” literate society), Pinkerton explicitly modeled an inevitable development whereby one stage “necessarily” follows on (and displaces) another. The eighteenth century saw the origins of modern evolutionary models of media shift. In Pinkerton's “Dissertation,” this model could not be more starkly confrontational: “In proportion as Literature advanced in the world Oral Tradition disappeared” (xv).

Percy's idealized narrative of “oral itinerant poet [s]” contributed to later ballad editors' conviction that certain *living* practices of ballad singing were surviving traces of feudal oral traditions. Glasgow editor William Motherwell opened his own collection *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* with a bold claim: “This interesting body of popular poetry, part of which, in point of antiquity, may be fairly esteemed equal, if not superior, to the most ancient of our written monuments, has owed its preservation principally to oral tradition” (Motherwell 1846, 1: 3). By comparing early eighteenth-century discussions of balladry—such as Joseph Addison's in the *Spectator*,<sup>19</sup> where ballads are assumed to be at once oral *and* printed—to later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarly (re)constructions of “authentic” ballads, we see the eighteenth-century emergence of confrontational models of print and oral tradition. Over the course of the century, I suggest, heightened reflection on the spread of *print* contributed to a new conceptualizing of valuable ballad traditions as innately *oral*. Eighteenth-century ballad scholars forged a sharp *conceptual* (not actual) separation between “oral” and “printed” ballads. In so doing, they contributed to the later binary of “orality and literacy” that many ballad scholars are still working to undo today.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, though, one cannot emphasize strongly enough that this was a highly *selected* form of “oral tradition” that was being revalued by later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars. In a larger book project, I am interested in the polite “rediscovery” of oral tradition *in relation to contemporary oral* practices—especially, those “vulgar” or popular oral practices that learned gentlemen routinely condemned (for instance, lay preaching, “Billingsgate rhetoric,” urban political activism, or “old wives’ tales,” to name only a few). In order to exercise their nostalgia for an era before print commerce, ballad collectors such as Percy had to associate “valuable” ballads with a distant past and an oral tradition that was imagined as separable from print commerce. These scholars strategically avoid any consideration of contemporary broadside ballad singing (especially topical, political, or bawdy ballads), for this still-vibrant aspect of what we might now call “popular oral culture,” tainted by the marketplace and associated with social and political **(p.244)** unrest, was not the legacy that genteel or professional scholars wished to preserve.

### Origins of Evolutionary Models of Media Shift: Conjecturing Oral Societies

In her account of “the printing press as an agent of change,” Eisenstein links the spread of printing and the development of “a new and distinctly modern historical consciousness” (Eisenstein 1979, 184). With the introduction of printing, she suggests, “less effort was required to preserve and pass on what was known.... Successive generations began to pride themselves on knowing more than had their forebears.... Human history itself acquired the character of an indefinitely extended unfolding sequence” (Eisenstein 1986, 6). In the late eighteenth century, we begin to see the idea of communications technologies as part of an inevitable, unfolding sequence of human history. In sketching out developmental models of mankind, later eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophers, especially those whom Dugald Stewart would later label conjectural historians, gestured toward modern evolutionary models of media shift. In their efforts to trace the origins of commercial society, authors such as Adam Smith in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Adam Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, William Robertson in *A View of the Progress of Society and History of the Discovery and Settlement of America*, and Henry Home, Lord Kames in his *Sketches of the History of Man* confronted and coped with a paucity of records for the earliest stages of mankind. Accordingly, they worked backward from what was known, employing assumptions about Providence and human nature and developing a series of working abstractions such as “society” “the economy,” and “progress.”<sup>21</sup> Scottish intellectuals saw their nation being rapidly transformed, and they contrasted the modern commercial towns of Glasgow and Edinburgh with what seemed to be the contemporaneous survival of older forms of social organization in the Highlands.<sup>22</sup> Seeking to account for these differences and organize them into an explanatory framework that could be used as a tool for further investigation, they developed a new model of history, the “four-stages” theory. Stadial theory held that society naturally progressed over time through a series of phases, each corresponding to a different mode of subsistence (hunter-gatherer, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce) and each with its own characteristic institutions, economy, manners, and social arrangements. These phases were linked not only to different forms of economic organization and social and artistic development<sup>23</sup> (p.245) but also, in some instances, to developments in the history of communications (such as the invention of letters, alphabetic writing, and especially, printing). At such moments, we come close to the idea that individual societies move inexorably forward through a succession of communications stages beginning with the development of speech. Ronald L. Meek suggests that we should see four-stages theory as “the first great theoretical embodiment” of “the notion of techno-economic determinism, and the principal of cultural evolutionism” (Meek 1976, 242).<sup>24</sup> While this succession of communications “stages” was most often viewed as “progress,” one also sees elite nostalgia for the supposed benefits of “rude societies” without complex communications technologies. In *The Origin and Progress of Language* (6 vols., 1773–1792), James Burnett, Lord Monboddo questioned whether the invention of writing had on the whole contributed to the advancement of human knowledge (Monboddo 1773–1792, 2: 24–25). Ironically, highly literate authors such as Monboddo deployed the posited virtues of an unlettered, distant “past” to critique their own “inauthentic” historical moment of writing and print.

Across the English Channel, the fugitive Marquis de Condorcet was hurriedly drafting his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (pub. posthumously in 1795). Like British conjectural historians, Condorcet aspired to trace the development of the human mind “as it manifests itself ... from generation to generation.... Such a picture is historical, since it ... is based on the observation of human societies throughout the different stages of their development” (Condorcet 1955b, 4). He divided up history into ten ages rather than four, but he too modeled the history of mankind as a continuous chain: “All peoples whose history is recorded

fall somewhere between our present degree of civilization and that which we still see amongst savage tribes ... so welding an uninterrupted chain between the beginning of historical time and the century in which we live" (8). He also systematically linked various stages of human social development to developments in the technology of communications. In a move that surely anticipates what Ruth Finnegan and others have critiqued as the "Great Divide" model of orality and literacy, he represents the "before" and "after" of alphabetic writing as "two great eras of the human race" (9). With the development of the alphabet, he enthused, "all that was necessary was to know how to recognize and reproduce these very few signs, and this final step assured the progress of the human race forever" (7). But Condorcet's most triumphant stage is the period "from the invention of printing to the time when philosophy and the sciences shook off the yoke of authority" (99). For him, as for Luther, the invention of printing was an epochal event, inaugurating (p.246) a new age of human history that would end priestly oppression. Condorcet self-consciously worked backward from his own historical moment, noting that he had to "conjecture the stages" due to the "scarcity of records" (8, 171). Meanwhile, Dugald Stewart was also explicitly measuring human progress in terms of various communications developments (especially the spread of printing): "[T]he means of communication afforded by the press, have, in the course of two centuries, accelerated the progress of the human mind, far beyond what the most sanguine hopes of our predecessors could have imagined."<sup>25</sup> Mary Poovey has suggested that one effect of the conjectural historians' "efforts to generate systematic knowledge was the production of a set of abstractions, which rapidly became the objects of these sciences" (Poovey 1998, 15). Was one such abstraction "oral society," eventually leading to the coinage of an even more influential abstraction, "oral culture"? Stewart came close to conjecturing an oral "stage" of society in terms anticipating our modern concept of oral culture when, in an ambiguous usage in which "culture" could be read either as a verb or a noun, he writes of the "culture of memory" and "the principles on which the culture of memory depends."<sup>26</sup>

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a sustained discourse questioning the effects of different media forms. The dramatic proliferation of print and the specter of future mass literacy generated widespread consideration of the nature and implications of media shift. In this essay I have contributed toward a genealogy of the ideas of "print culture" and "oral tradition" I have sketched the eighteenth-century emergence of an originally negative, but increasingly positive idea of oral tradition and suggested that literate groups' ideas about oral forms and practices developed in an especially close dialectical relationship with ideas about *print* (especially print commerce). Today, a valuable and growing body of work on "oral culture" in early modern Britain by scholars such as Keith Thomas, Daniel Woolf, Adam Fox, and Alexandra Walsham routinely stresses that "literacy" did not displace "orality" Rather—in the terms of this scholarship- "literacy and orality coexisted ... in a mutually enriching equilibrium" (Walsham 2002, 173). But where, we must ask, did this model of a division into "literacy and orality" come from in the first place? It is to the mid-and later eighteenth century, I have suggested, that we can trace the development of an "antagonistic" model of oral and literate communication, and the related development of "evolutionary" models of media shift (the idea that one media "stage" succeeds and/or displaces another).<sup>27</sup> "Orality" "print culture" and so on are not so much *things* as abstract concepts with interwoven histories. They are aspects of a heuristic that we employ, rather as our eighteenth-century predecessors did, in an attempt to organize and understand complex phenomena.

### Notes:

- (1) . Havelock and other theorists of what Ong calls “primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing)” employ the concept of “orality” in a specific sense that needs to be distinguished from the vague usage in common parlance today. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the term “orality” is not a modern coinage but dates back to at least 1666, where it was used in a theological context as part of a vigorous ongoing debate concerning scripture versus “oral tradition” as the rule of faith (discussed below).
- (2) . See also 9 n. 18.
- (3) . For a more recent commentary, see Johns 2002, 106–125.
- (4) . Baron, Lindquist, and Shevlin, eds. 2007. This volume contains essays by Ann Blair, Roger Chartier, Peter Stallybrass, and myself, among others.
- (5) . See also Williams 1966; Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; and Siskin 1998, 72–74.
- (6) . For an important reminder that the crystallization of a concept may predate the use of any particular word or phrase, see Peter de Bolla's essay in this volume.
- (7) . I explore some of the implications of the lapse of the Licensing Act in *The Women of Grub Street* (McDowell 1998). See also Feather 1988 and Astbury 1978.
- (8) . James, *To the Honourable House of Commons. Gentlemen, Since You have been pleased to lay such a heavy Tax upon Paper*, n.d. (c. 1696–1698), reprinted in James 2005, 96–97. James was the grandmother of Jacob Ilive (discussed by Adrian Johns in this volume).
- (9) . See, for instance, Kernan's reading of Pope through the lens of McLuhan in Kernan 1989, 8–16.
- (10) . See also Foxon 1991.
- (11) . On early modern scholars' methods for information management, see the essay by Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass in this volume.
- (12) . See, for instance, *An Epistle from Mr. Pope, to Dr. Arbuthnot* (London, 1734), in which Pope repeatedly uses the word “print,” but only as a verb.
- (13) . I have also benefited here from Hudson 1996a “*O Divinum Scripturae Beneficium!*”
- (14) . Lafitau, ed. Fenton and Moore, 1974–1977, 1: lxxxvi. Lafitau's work was originally published as *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*.
- (15) . Significantly, Wood's essay was first published privately in 1767 and 1769 as *An Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* [no place of publication given on title page]. Only after his death in 1771 was the title changed to *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (London, 1775), my emphasis.
- (16) . Rousseau also briefly speculates that Homer might have been unable to write.

(17) . Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Part 1 [1792], reprinted in Hamilton, ed., *Works* (1854–1860), 2: 391.

(18) . I argue this in detail in “The Art of Printing Was Fatal” (McDowell 2010) and “The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*” (McDowell 2006). See also Maureen McLane's essay in this volume.

(19) . See Addison, *Spectator* 70 (21 May 1711), 74 (25 May 1711), and 85 (7 June 1711).

(20) . For recent attempts to undo this binary, see Fumerton and Guerrini forthcoming; Perry 2006 on “Ballads and Songs in the Long Eighteenth Century”; McLane's essay in the present volume; and McDowell 2006.

(21) . See Poovey 1998, especially 15.

(22) . Johannes Fabian suggests that the “denial of coevalness” of actually coexisting peoples is a “constitutive phenomenon” of the modern discipline of anthropology, a discipline whose origins he traces to this period (Matti Bunzl, foreword to Fabian 2003, x–xi).

(23) . See, for instance, Blair's “Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian” where he explicitly links the characteristics of Ossian's oral poetry to his “very remote aera”: “there are four great stages through which men successively pass in the progress of society. The first and earliest is the life of hunters; pasturage succeeds to this, as the ideas of property begin to take root; next agriculture; and lastly, commerce. Throughout Ossian's poems, we plainly find ourselves in the first of these periods of society” (reprinted in Macpherson 1996, 345–408; 353).

(24) . See also McLane 2006, which shows how James Beattie's poem “The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius” adapts stadial theory to theorize the evolution of poetry since “rude ages.”

(25) . Stewart, *Life ... of Adam Smith* [1793], reprinted in Hamilton, ed., *Works* (1854–1860), 10: 54.

(26) . Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Part 1 [1792], reprinted in Hamilton, ed., *Works* (1854–1860), 2: 391.

(27) . For a concise critique of the “stages” model of media shift, see Love 2003, 45–64.



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