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Paula McDowell,

“Towards a Genealogy of ‘Print Culture’ and ‘Oral Tradition,’”

This Is Enlightenment.

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Paula McDowell is Associate Professor of English at New York University. She specializes in Restoration and eighteenth-century literature and print culture. She is the author of *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford, 1998), an important reconstruction of the prominent roles women in the middle and working classes played in writing, publishing, and distributing publications. McDowell’s groundbreaking recovery of women’s involvement in the book trades is also characterized by attentiveness to the oral and print practices in which women were involved; specifically, she uncovers multiple examples of women’s involvement in political, commercial, and religious speech as balladeers, hawkers, and preachers, and their involvement in the printing, publishing, and distribution of printed texts. In this chapter as well, McDowell suggests that historical printed writing that attempts to collect or theorize oral culture must be examined alongside actual oral practices, including recitation, preaching, singing, and speechifying.

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Whereas in an earlier essay (see above, pp. 353–74), Kastan explores how (for Shakespeare in particular) the world of the stage (in which his plays were performed) and the world of the print marketplace (in which his plays were marketed and sold) were essentially discontinuous, in this essay McDowell argues for a closer relationship between print and oral cultures, although one that is difficult to disentangle given that the concept of “oral culture” was in fact created retrospectively. The following essay offers an overview of the development of the use of terms such as “orality” and “print culture”: the former is a product of the eighteenth century, whereby “the spread of print commerce triggers heightened reflection on oral communication,” and the latter is a product of twentieth-century scholars attempting to theorize oral culture. Thus, McDowell recovers an eighteenth-century discourse about oral culture that was itself a product of the rising dominance—and commercialism—of print (and nostalgia for a putatively uncommercialized form of literary exchange). Her essay also locates the origins of an “‘antagonistic’ model of oral and literate communication” in the very print productions that sought to re-present, or remediate, oral culture. That is, McDowell identifies in mid- to later-eighteenth-century written discourse the construction of an

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evolutionary model of media shift, one in which older forms of technology are seen as giving way to newer ones—a model which, she points out, scholars are still attempting to debunk.

Towards a Genealogy of "Print Culture" and "Oral Tradition"

I. Origins of the "Oral-Literate Equation"

396 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."¹ In Milman Parry's published doctoral thesis, "L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère" (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*."² 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 equation but coming this time from the study and practice of rhetoric." Then, in 1962–63, 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), *La 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.³

¹ Greek poet from around the eighth or ninth century BCE and supposed author of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*; also commonly cited as the greatest epic poet in Western history.