Defoe's *Essay upon Literature* and Eighteenth-Century Histories of Mediation

PAULA McDOWELL

"HAZLITT IS A DE FOEITE." SO BOASTED WILLIAM HAZLITT'S PUBlisher—another "De Foeite"—in a letter to a friend in 1819.[1] After Hazlitt died, in 1830, his son, William Hazlitt, Jr., published what he called a "complete collection of the writings of Daniel De Foe."[2] In his prefatory "Life of Daniel De Foe," the younger Hazlitt singled out for praise Defoe's *Essay upon Literature* (*EUL*), a 127-page text that is little known today:

> Amongst the multifarious subjects that engaged the attention of De Foe, one was of great curiosity to literary men, and important in its consequences to the public at large. The work we are about to notice is highly excellent in its kind, and contains much information within a narrow compass; it is entitled "An Essay upon Literature: or, An Enquiry into the Antiquity and Original of Letters. London: 1726." As a writer who had contributed so largely to literature, he might be expected to feel interested in an inquiry that brought to light the sources of its manufacture. In the time of De Foe, the English language had produced but few publications upon the subject, and none containing so much information in a popular form. It was, therefore, an object of curiosity with his countrymen; and the manner in which he has treated it exhibits more learning and research than he has usually had credit for. In short, whoever wishes for much useful information within a narrow compass, will be amply compensated by the perusal of this little volume.[3]

William Hazlitt, Jr., described *EUL* as "excellent in its kind." But what kind of work is it? Much depends on how we answer this question, for, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has observed, "of particular significance for the value of 'works of art' and 'literature' is the interactive relation between the classification of an entity and the functions it is expected or desired to perform" (32). In determining what Hazlitt took to be

PAULA McDOWELL, associate professor of English at New York University, is the author of *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Clarendon, 1998) and the editor of *Elinor James: Printed Writings* (Ashgate, 2005). Her essays have been published in *PMLA*, *Book History*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Religion and Literature*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *Genre*, as well as the anthology *This Is Enlightenment* (U of Chicago P, 2010) and many other venues. She has recently completed a book manuscript titled "The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain" and is working on a study of John "Orator" Henley.

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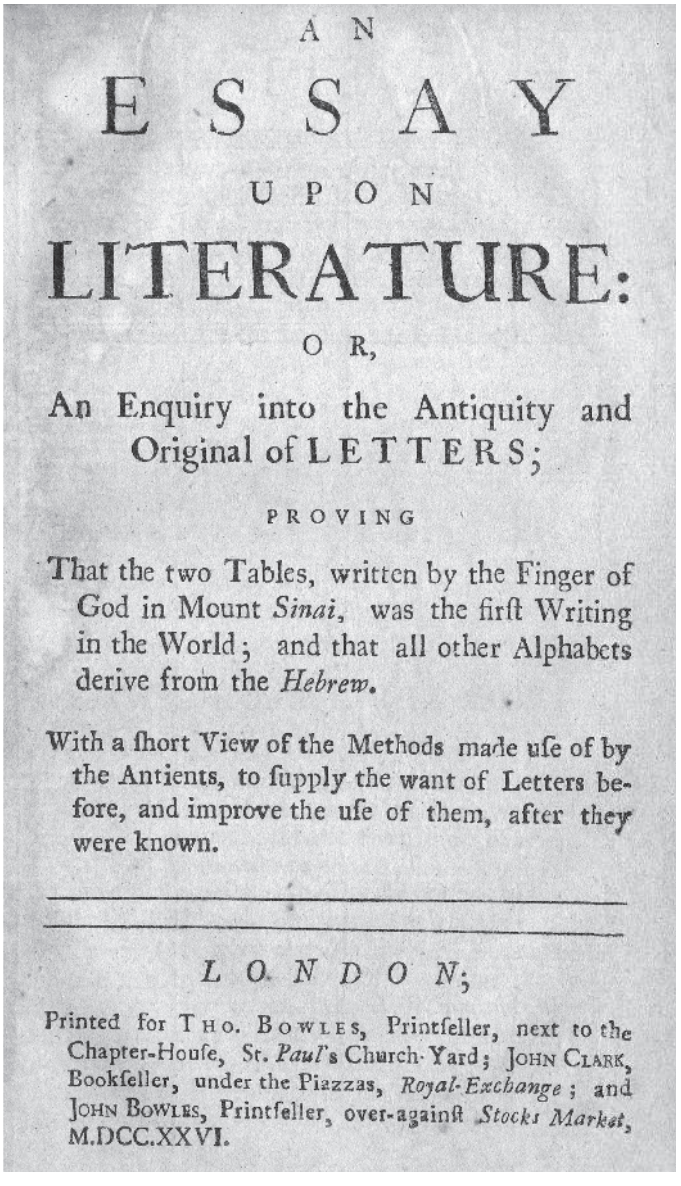
EUL's kind, we might begin by identifying the features that he focused on. He praised the work as containing "much information in a popular form" and "much information within a narrow compass" (twice). By its "kind," then, he appears to have meant a text synthesizing "much information" for a "popular" audience: both "literary men" and "the public at large." He also praised *EUL* as in some sense original: "the English language had produced but few publications upon the subject." I borrow Hazlitt's tactic of attempting to introduce a little-known text by identifying its kind (or genre), but I classify the text differently.[4] As Ralph Cohen has suggested, genre concepts and relations are always evolving, because our purposes for classification change. "The grouping is a process, not a determinate category," he writes, and "texts can be simultaneously members of different groupings" (204, 210). My ultimate goal too differs from Hazlitt's, for I aim to demonstrate what can be learned by grouping together *EUL* and other texts as members of a genre that I call "histories of mediation."

EUL is not about "literature" as we commonly understand this classification today. The essay's full title, which Hazlitt does not provide his nineteenth-century readers, is:

> *An Essay upon Literature; or, An Enquiry into the Antiquity and Original of Letters; Proving, That the Two Tables, Written by the Finger of God in Mount Sinai, Was the First Writing in the World; and That All Other Alphabets Derive from the Hebrew; With a Short View of the Methods Made Use of by the Antients, to Supply the Want of Letters before, and Improve the Use of Them, after They Were Known* (fig. 1).

As this title suggests, the subject of *EUL* is the origin of "Letters," or writing. But Defoe also addresses "the Methods Made Use of . . . to Supply the Want of Letters before, and Improve the Use of Them, after They Were Known." Surveying the arts of transmission from Moses to modernity, he discusses oral tradition, writing systems, and the invention and spread of printing—what we might call modes of human communication. To call this text a history of writing, then, falls short of describing what it actually does.

In their introduction to the essay collection *This Is Enlightenment*, Clifford Siskin and William Warner propose that "Enlightenment" may be seen as "an event in the history


AN
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LONDON;
Printed for THO. BOWLES, Printſeller, next to the Chapter-Houſe, St. *Paul*'s Church-Yard; JOHN CLARK, Bookſeller, under the Piazzas, *Royal-Exchange*; and JOHN BOWLES, Printſeller, over-againſt *Stocks Market*, M.DCC.XXVI.

FIG. 1
Title page of Defoe's *An Essay upon Literature*.

of mediation" (1). They state, "[W]e use 'mediation' here in its broadest sense as shorthand for the work done by tools, by what we would now call 'media' of every kind—everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between" (5). The editors and several contributors to this collection address questions of definition that arise here: for instance, how was the term *mediation* used before the twentieth century? What is the relation between *medium*, *media*, and *mediation* in the philological record? When did the concept of "communication" arise? The verb *to mediate* stems from the Latin *mediare*, to be in the middle, to intercede, to act as an intermediary ("Mediate"). Early modern authors typically used *medium* as a term for a "connecting substance, agent, or milieu"—as "water is a 'medium' for sound" (Siskin and Warner 6). The operation of a medium seems to imply a process of mediation. But as John Guillory cautions in his essay on the origins of the "media concept," early modern authors typically left this link implicit, and "the path by which [the] ancient word for 'middle' [*medius*] came to serve as the collective noun for our most advanced communication technologies is difficult to trace."[5]

Siskin and Warner note in passing that Francis Bacon typically used *mediation* "in reference to divine and human intercession" (6), and Guillory, in his essay in *This Is Enlightenment*, writes that the "grandest example" was "the 'mediation' of Christ as Redeemer" ("Enlightening Mediation" 52). But, surprisingly, this is all that *This Is Enlightenment* says about the widespread early modern use of *mediation* in reference to divine intercession. In contrast, I argue that questions of divine intercession and the human transmission of God's word were central to Enlightenment debates about what we would now call media. Guillory suggestively links Bacon's discussion of tradition (or transmission) in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) to issues of media and communication in their modern sense (40–41). Bacon was concerned with the passing on of knowledge in the scholastic curriculum, yet he also seemed to launch into a more general reflection when he wrote that "the organ of Tradition, it is either Speech or Writing" (230). I pursue this hint of a connection between early modern debates about tradition and our modern ideas of media and mediation. For in the Enlightenment, I argue, debates about tradition were in fact the dominant discourse about what we would now call media, mediation, and communication.

In its most basic sense, *tradition* means anything handed down across generations. In early Christian usage, it "refers to a 'handing on,' the delivery of God's truth . . . through [Christ and] the apostles" (Phillips 11). In theological discourse, *tradition* implies the traditions and rituals of the established church. I begin by addressing the concept of tradition, suggesting that over the course of the eighteenth century the idea of tradition (and so mediation) underwent significant change. The first half of my essay focuses on issues of tradition, mediation, and what we might call media shift in *EUL*. I read Defoe as a theorist of mediation whose writings on this topic offer an illuminating link between early modern and twenty-first-century understandings of this concept. A central concern of *EUL* is tradition, or the passing down of *traditio* across time and space. While Defoe begins with an impassioned argument for the divine origins of writing, he drops this concern about a third of the way through his text. His focus on mediation in the sense of divine intercession (God gave Moses writing at Mount Sinai to mediate between himself and man) gives way to a new kind of history of mediation: one fundamentally concerned with the development and consequences of what we now call media. Writing at the crossroads of theological and secular worldviews, Defoe mediates between, but by no means reconciles, these competing views. He extensively discusses oral tradition as a mode of

transmission. When writing about biblical examples, he marvels that tradition could be extraordinarily accurate, but in all other cases he insists that writing, rather than tradition, is "the Art by which . . . all manner of Science is convey'd from Age to Age." Defoe also attempts to merge scripture-based explanations of the origins of writing with a new, stadial model of human development that makes room for modern inventions such as printing. (In this regard, *EUL* anticipates some of the stadial models devised by later-eighteenth-century conjectural historians and philosophes.) On the one hand, Defoe's insistence that writing was a onetime gift from God directly contradicts later, evolutionary models. But, on the other hand, the bulk of his story is one of *human* inventions and of what he calls "progressive Knowledge" (229).

In the second part of my essay, I suggest what can be learned by reading *EUL* alongside other histories of mediation. By classifying selected texts as members of this genre, we see new links between works that otherwise seem polar opposites in various ways. Examples that I point to include the Anglican divine Edward Stillingfleet's *Origines Sacrae; or, A Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith* (1662), William Temple's *Essay upon . . . Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690), William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738–41), and the Marquis de Condorcet's radically secular *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind* (1795). A shared concern of these wildly different authors is tradition, or the passing down of knowledge across time and space. Stillingfleet's goal was to defend the historicity of the Scriptures—and, more broadly, to argue for the superior reliability of texts as a means of passing down God's word. But later authors addressing tradition, including many theologians, increasingly had divergent goals. Taking a remarkable position for an Anglican statesman in the 1680s, Temple argued for the reliability of elite, ancient oral traditions regardless of their pagan origins. For Warburton, by contrast, the most compelling questions of medial transmission and Christian faith were inseparably intertwined. Like Defoe, Warburton struggled to reconcile traditional Christian accounts of the origins of writing with new evidence of the development and diversity of "letters." Identifying continuities between Defoe and these other authors, I then point to neglected links between devout histories of mediation and the secular histories of later-eighteenth-century stadial theorists. Attempting to explain the origins of modern commercial society by theorizing "stages" in the "natural" development of humankind, some stadial theorists echoed Defoe in casting their own era as a stage or "Age" defined by a set of communication practices and tools. In my conclusion, I return to the question of the neglect of *EUL*. While not about literature as we know it, this text is about literature as Defoe understood it and as we too might understand it: a forum in the republic of letters capacious enough to admit a learned yet would-be popular text that addresses, in different terms, the transhistorical and global development of the modes and means of human communication.

The Enlightenment saw a profound interrogation of the reliability of different transmission modes and the implications of this reliability for knowledge and faith. In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke assessed the plausibility of testimony as the basis for belief. Locke made an exception for the apostles' testimony in support of miracles. But in all other cases, he cautioned, "any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has. . . . [T]he Hear-say of an Hear-say, is yet less considerable. So that *in traditional Truths, each remove weakens the force of the proof*" (663–64; bk. 4, ch. 16). Locke's assessment of testimony's credibility is an example of the Enlightenment obsession with the question of knowledge: how it is acquired

(by the senses, by the spirit, by testimony) and how it is transmitted over time. The literature of Defoe's lifetime participates in a long-standing war of ideas between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics argued that tradition was more reliable than textual transmission and interpretation, while Protestants held that writing was potentially the most reliable method of preserving and communicating knowledge. Tradition in this theological context is not exclusively oral; it also comprises rituals, gestures, and so on. Similarly, when Bacon wrote about *traditio* in the context of the scholastic curriculum, he included writing under this rubric. But by the eighteenth century, I suggest, theological controversies had forged so strong a connection between tradition and oral transmission that *tradition* typically implied oral tradition. In 1755 Samuel Johnson defined *tradition* as "the art or practice of delivering accounts from mouth to mouth, without written memorials" ("Tradition"). Protestant scrutiny of tradition was only one discourse contributing to the devaluation of oral tradition and testimony. In the realm of history, antiquarians continued to draw on oral tales, legends, and the testimony of credible witnesses, but they increasingly relegated these sources to the margins of histories built on the foundation of material artifacts and written texts (Woolf, esp. 352–91).

But the larger eighteenth-century story of tradition is not one of its *discrediting* as a form of mediation; rather, it is a story of scrutiny and reconstitution on different grounds. European intellectuals continued to link the absence of letters to barbarism. But around 1730 one detects *tradition* used in new ways in ethnographic writings and a wide range of scholarly debates. New information about sophisticated peoples seemingly without writing generated interest in what Defoe called societies "without the Invention of Letters" (*General History* 84). The later eighteenth century would see groundbreaking arguments for the idea of oral tradition in our modern secular sense of the passing down over generations of complex histories, genealogies, and works of verbal art. A handful of classicists proposed that Homer might have been illiterate, and in 1760 the Scottish Highlander James Macpherson claimed to have reconstructed the works of a third-century "Homer of the Highlands" passed down chiefly by word of mouth. At this time of perceived rising literacy and spreading print, antiquarians, ballad scholars, poets, and others began to cast themselves as heroic rescuers of valuable oral traditions that they saw as on the brink of being lost. Oral tradition as a form of mediation was a key eighteenth-century issue—and one, we shall now see, in which Defoe took great interest.

EUL was published by Thomas and John Bowles, brothers whose family dominated the London trade in prints and maps for more than a century (c. 1690–c. 1830).[6] Thomas Bowles, Jr., was especially known as a publisher of maps and topographic views (Clayton). Defoe made extensive use of maps on his tours throughout Britain, and he consulted them as reference sources for his works. *EUL* is one of several texts that Defoe wrote or contributed to during the later 1720s that address Britain's commercial future. In *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–26), *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726), *A General History of Discoveries and Improvements* (1725–26), *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728), and *Atlas Maritimus and Commercialis* (1728), themes of navigation, trade, commerce, and their relation to global power intersect. *EUL* appears to have been a spin-off from *A General History of Discoveries and Improvements* (*GHD*). Published in four monthly parts from October 1725 to January 1726, *GHD* is a survey of developments in navigation and commerce with a focus on inventions and tools. It begins with "the first Ages after the Flood" and ends with the invention of the compass, a key tool of navigation (and so of trade). Defoe's concerns in some sections of *GHD* closely

anticipate passages in *EUL*. He devotes special attention to the Phoenicians, the preeminent mariners of the ancient world, whom he praises as "the *Englishmen* of that Age." The Phoenicians were "the Patrons of Commerce . . . [the] encouragers, (if not the originals) of Arts and Sciences, and the first spreaders of universal Knowledge in the World" (*GHD* 78). He discusses the Phoenicians' role in the development of writing, which he takes to be their greatest contribution to global trade. One chapter of *GHD* is titled "Of the Phoenicians Being Early Improvers of Learning, As Well As of Commerce and Navigation, and Particularly of Their Prince Cadmus Introducing the Knowledge of Letters into Greece" (Contents). But he also hints that he will soon be publishing a text that addresses the development of writing in more detail: "But not to dwell upon that here, which I may have occasion also to mention again" (84–85).

In a chapter of *GHD* on the origins of writing, Defoe states that "the *Phoenicians* . . . had their *Cadmus*, to whose Wit and Invention, they to this Day, tho' wrongfully, ascribe the invention of Letters; I say wrongfully because I think it is clear that the first knowledge of Letters was from Heaven it self, and that immediately by the Finger of God writing the *Hebrew* Law" (84). Similarly, in *EUL* he argues that "the first Writing" was a divine gift: a form of mediation between God and man. Evoking the practice of printing in his description of God's gift of writing, he insists that God gave Moses letters at Mount Sinai, "*impress'd*, by what Method we know not, . . . on the two Tables of Stone" (237; my italics). Defoe held that "Three Things in Nature"—letters, numbers, and music—were "above the reach of Human Invention" (249). What these three miracles have in common is that in each system of notation, small units can be combined in seemingly infinite ways.

While Defoe repeatedly insists that God invented writing, it is important to note that in advancing his case for the divine origins of writing he spends far more time assessing competing human claims. He discusses Egyptian, Arabian, Phoenician, Greek, and Chinese writing systems and reviews arguments that each of these peoples invented letters. Fascinated by all the writing systems that he knows of, he discusses not only alphabetic writing but also pictorial and iconic systems of recording and communicating graphic information. More than a decade before the publication of Warburton's *Divine Legation*, with its groundbreaking account of hieroglyphics, Defoe praised the ancient Egyptians as being "accounted the wisest People in the Earth. . . . They invented . . . Writing by *Hieroglyphicks*," or "paintings of Creatures and Figures" (*EUL* 231). Some Renaissance intellectuals idealized hieroglyphics as a means of communicating esoteric knowledge while keeping it private from the vulgar masses (Hudson, esp. 17–21). Defoe too was fascinated by forms of secret writing, but he ultimately sided with Enlightenment reformers in promoting the goal of public knowledge. Alphabetic writing, he believed, was easier to learn and so more readily available to the needs of common people. It was therefore the superior writing system, especially when used in tandem with a modern invention that he also celebrates, the "Art of Printing." He declares, "However Ingenious the *Egyptians* were in suiting . . . *Hieroglyphicks* to their own understanding, it must be allow'd that it was but a poor Shift, compared to the present improvement of Letters, and the Writing and Printing . . . Letters in Books as is since practis'd in the World" (231). "Next to the *Ægyptians*," he continues, "the *Phenicians* are esteem'd the antientest People in the World, who were of any Fame for Wisdom" (234). Today, the Phoenician phonetic alphabet is generally held to be the ancestor of modern alphabetic writing. But after reviewing Egyptian and Phoenician—and Arabian and Chinese—claims to the invention of letters, Defoe reins in his armchair exploration of the world's writing systems and insists once

again that all these peoples, "Ingenious" or otherwise, learned their letters from the Israelites—and so from God.

Then, suddenly, about a third of the way through, *EUL* shifts from one kind of history of mediation to another. Defoe drops his argument for the divine origin of letters and proceeds in the remainder of his text to consider humans' role in the development of the arts of transmission. The rest of *EUL* is a progressive narrative. Societies advance from one invention or discovery to another and major discoveries and inventions seem to trigger a new "Age" or "Time." He writes, "Having . . . given an Account of the Writing of the Ancients, and brought them out of the Infant Days of this Art, it will not be amiss to speak . . . of the . . . Usage of the World, to the Time when the Invention of the Printing Press, and the Use of Types for impressing the Letters as Written, was found out in the World" (287). Defoe associates different tools with different ages. The use of stone and chisels dates to the "Infant Days" of writing, before "the Time that [humankind] came to the . . . Use of Pen, Ink, and Paper" (281). For Defoe, "Writing" implies inscription or impression. It requires "a Tool, to impress the Mark, or Letter, and the Substance on which that Impression was to be made."[7] *EUL* discusses tools of inscription such as chisels, mallets, hammers, and stones, and "Substance[s]" for inscription such as papyrus, wood, plaster, wax tablets, and the bark and leaves of trees. Supporting my argument that early modern discussions of tradition were the period's dominant discourse on mediation, Defoe praises writing as "the most useful of all Arts in the World, as it has been the preserver of Knowledge, and has *handed down the first Principles of Science in the World, from one Generation to another*" (229; my italics). It is the art of writing by which "we . . . stand . . . upon the Shoulders of our Fore-fathers Learning, and have improv'd upon their Invention, carry'd on progressive Knowledge, upon the foot of their Discoveries, and brought experimental Knowledge both in Arts and in Nature, to that Prodigy of Perfection to which it is now arriv'd."

But in Defoe's history of mediation, it is the "exquisite . . . Art of Printing" (291) that has triggered the most immediate sociopolitical shifts. This tool or invention has inaugurated a new "Age" (or "Ages") in the history of humankind. Defoe says, "[I]t is not my Purpose here to enter into a large History of the Art of Printing, or . . . the particular Improvements of it in the several Ages since its Invention." Instead, he offers an "Abridgement" of such a "History" (304–05). Drawing on Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683), he attributes the invention of printing to Laurens Janszoon Coster, of the Netherlands, and he represents Johannes Gutenberg as a thief: "John Guttenburgh was Comrade to this *Coster*, and having seen all his Methods, and made himself Master of the Performance, stole away his Tools" (305). He mentions other pioneers in the history of printing, such as Peter Schoeffer and William Caxton, and he briefly notes developments in printing technology and related trades, including papermaking, woodblocks, metal type, and a device he calls the "Rolling Press." But, ultimately, Defoe was less interested in printing technology than in the question of its effects. He devotes the bulk of his discussion of printing to a consideration of its consequences for oral tradition and "Pen and Ink Writing." Today, proponents of evolutionary (or *de*volutionary) models of media shift lament that one valuable technology, art, or age has been displaced by another (as Marshall McLuhan opined that the "Gutenberg era" was eclipsed by the "electronic age"). Anticipating this nostalgia, Defoe says that he will describe "the Manner of Pen and Ink Writing . . . and the Perfection it was brought to, till it received a fatal Baulk in the still more exquisite, tho' less difficult, Art of Printing" (291). In this passage, he is discussing penmanship, as distinct from writing

in general. But "Fatal Baulk" suggests death—or at least cessation of improvement—and at points in *EUL* he implies that the technology of writing was itself being displaced. Later in the century, the ballad scholar Joseph Ritson declared that "the Art of Printing was fatal" to earlier oral traditions of balladry (McDowell, "Art"). Was Defoe here simply lamenting the decline of a skill (the art of penmanship), or is this an example of an emergent evolutionary model of media shift, whereby one form of human communication inexorably succeeds or displaces another?

Defoe devotes special attention to the consequences of writing and printing for oral tradition. In writing about tradition, he distinguishes sharply between two main types. When writing about biblical examples, he marvels at how reliable tradition can be as a means of transmitting history and knowledge: "When Men had not the Knowledge of Letters, . . . Knowledge and Discoveries in Philosophy, or in Mechanick Arts, with History and the Knowledge of Things past, . . . were preserv'd only in the Repositories of those undecay'd Memories when Men were living Records of a Thousand Years standing." Because the biblical patriarchs lived so long ("a Thousand Years"), they had time to ensure that their wisdom was passed down effectively through the male lineage: "In the *Antediluvian* World, if they had not the use of Letters . . . yet *Oral Tradition*, had so just an Authority, the Authors living so many Years to perfect their Posterity in the Particulars of what they related to them, that we have no Reason to doubt the Truth of what was handed down from Father to Son" (*EUL* 230). But when discussing nonscriptural examples of oral tradition, Defoe associates the absence of letters with tyranny and superstition, the pretenses of pagan deities, and "Fable and Romance" (301). The ancient's "Adoration [of] the vilest of Men" (and sometimes women) was "owing . . . to the want of the Use of Letters, and of Faithful Writers, to have recorded the Histories of those Times." If "the first Ages of the World" had letters, the ancients would have seen that Venus was "an everlasting Whore, an insatiate impudent Strumpet, an infamous notorious She-Devil, the vilest and worst of her Sex" (239–40).[8]

Yet while Defoe theorizes the consequences of "the Use of Letters" for oral tradition, he suggests that it was not writing but printing that brought about the greatest shifts. In addressing "the corrupt multiplying Usage of Tradition," he speculates that the corruption of oral tradition is "the Effect of the Want of Letters, and of the Art of Writing." But he then reflects that "*the like wou'd be the Effect*, and that notwithstanding the Knowledge of both, if the Art of Printing had not follow'd, to make what was written diffusive, by the Multitude and Cheapness of Books" (302; my italics). The ease and low cost of printing technology multiply the number of books, making them available to more (and more kinds of) readers. In addition, this growing readership can now compare and evaluate multiple accounts. In 1979 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein argued that printing encouraged or even triggered a new epistemology along with new scholarly techniques. In Michael McKeon's summary, "the very conception of an 'objective' history owes a great deal to print technology. By permanently preserving and reproducing what could be no more than transient productions in oral and even scribal culture, print stabilized . . . the past . . . as a realm of experience . . . susceptible to objective study" (McKeon 43; cf. Eisenstein 184–95). Anticipating Eisensteinian arguments about print and the possibility of "objective" history, Defoe argues that printing fundamentally affected the modus operandi of history and science: "This is one of the Benefits of History; we have now no more dependence upon Tradition or the oral History of Men and Things . . . and tho' it is true, that even since the use of Letters and of Writing, there has been too much Fiction and Fable enter'd into the Writings of the Learned

. . . yet even among these we find Room to pick out Fragments of Truth" (*EUL* 241). For Defoe print had no *inherent* link to truth. But the "Multitude and Cheapness of Books" enabled by printing technology meant wider comparison of competing accounts and allowed human users to challenge "Fiction[s]" (oral or otherwise). For this reason, in Defoe's history of mediation, print is a ladder to liberty. He concludes, "[T]he *Printing Art* has out-run the Pen, and may pass for the greatest Improvement of its Kind in the World" (301).

Defoe says, "[W]e have now no more dependence upon Tradition or . . . oral History." The key word here is "dependence." There are still "oral Histor[ies]," but literate people's relation to these sources has changed. I have suggested that by Defoe's day oral sources had been relegated to a marginal role as forms of historical evidence. In the mid-1720s, Defoe repeatedly addressed the shortcomings of oral tradition. The same year that he published *EUL*, he published the final volume of *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*. Throughout the *Tour*, he records *and* distances himself from oral customs and lore. Of Tintagel Castle in Wales, he says, "[A]s for the story of King Arthur being born . . . there, 'tis a piece of tradition, only on oral history, and not any authority to be produced for it" (2: 11). In *The Great Law of Subordination Consider'd* (1724), he suggests that, under certain conditions, orally transmitted knowledge could usefully supplement empirical observation and extensive reading. Defoe's narrator recalls how, on coming to England, he "read over . . . all the best Histories of the Island" and consulted maps. He then "travell'd in . . . Tours, over the whole Island. . . . I took with me an ancient Gentleman of my Acquaintance, who . . . was thorowly acquainted with . . . every Part of *England*, and . . . was to me as a walking Library, or . . . moveable Map of the Countries and Towns through which we pass'd" (46–47). The "ancient Gentleman" in question is not lugging folios in his backpack; rather, his *memory* makes him "a walking Library, or . . . moveable Map." It is not coincidental that this trustworthy companion is "ancient," "Gentle," an "Acquaintance," and, above all, a man. Gender, rank, and reputation were critical to endowing oral testimony with authority. The testimony of old men might still be trusted, but as the phrase "old wives' tales" suggests, old women's words were inherently suspect. In several of his works of the mid-1720s, Defoe associates old women with the telling of fortunes, fables, and "merry Tales." In *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1726) he systematically distances himself from superstitious oral practices (McDowell, "Defoe"), and in *A System of Magick* (1726) he observes, "[W]e have abundance of merry Tales scatter'd abroad in the Oral Tradition of antient times, and among those antient things called Old Women" (225). Like many of his Protestant contemporaries, he also associated oral tales and Catholicism. Of the legends surrounding St. Bega, he writes, "[T]hese, and the like Tales, I leave where I found them, (*viz.*) among the Rubbish of . . . old Women and . . . *Romish* Priests."[9]

But Defoe's simultaneous distancing of himself from and zest for oral tales also anticipate a later development. Over the course of the eighteenth century, attitudes toward oral sources changed again in new ways. In 1725 the clergyman and antiquarian Henry Bourne published *Antiquities of the Common People . . . Shewing Which . . . Ought to Be Laid Aside*. Bourne's compendium was motivated by a desire to root out "papist" and heathen "errors" insinuated into Christian rituals, but paradoxically it preserved much valuable information about popular lore and customs (as did Defoe's skeptical reporting of oral tales). But after the final defeat of the Jacobites, in 1745, the gradual diminishing of the perceived "Catholic threat" in Britain helped make possible a new ethnographic (rather than doctrinal) approach to oral tradition. Bourne's *Antiquities* was mined by later antiquarians

such as John Brand, whose *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777) made "popular superstitions" a fashionable area of antiquarian study. Over the course of the century, oral tradition as a form of mediation was scrutinized, debunked, adapted, and reconstituted in its modern, secular sense. Instead of using new scholarly methods to expose oral tradition as superstitious, scholars like Brand now argued that oral tradition—even popular tradition—was an object in need of study in its own right.

I have considered issues of tradition as divine intercession and human communication in *EUL*, presenting Defoe as a theorist of mediation whose writings offer an illuminating link between early modern and twenty-first-century understandings of this term. I will now suggest what might be learned by reading *EUL* alongside other examples of what I call histories of mediation. A key shared feature of early modern texts in this genre is a concern with oral tradition as a form of mediation for passing down divine or secular knowledge. In the Restoration, the most influential histories of mediation were written by divines who addressed the politically sensitive question of the "*Orality* of the Rule of Faith."[10] (In rejecting Catholic appeals to tradition, Anglicans were also rejecting the prospect—and, after 1685, the reality—of a Catholic king.) In 1662 Stillingfleet published *Origines Sacrae; or, A Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith*. Stillingfleet's goal was to demonstrate that the Scriptures were more reliable than tradition in passing down God's word. But, in advancing his argument, he devoted entire sections of his text to the history of writing systems, considered in relation to oral tradition. The first chapter, "The Obscurity and Defect of Ancient History," addresses topics such as "the want of credibility in Heathen Histories asserted and proved by the general defect for want of timely records among Heathen Nations." We encounter topics such as "Hieroglyphicks" and "[t]he use of letters among the Greeks" (1; bk. 1, ch. 1). Hudson rightly describes *Origines Sacrae* as "a work with large sections on the history of writing" (36), but the breadth of Stillingfleet's interests in diverse modes of transmission suggests the general usefulness of a broader rubric of "histories of mediation." Stillingfleet's concern with mediation was not limited to a concern with writing, and his work proved hugely influential to later historians of mediation, devout or otherwise. Eighteenth-century Anglicans and atheists alike read this text.

In nontheological contexts, where religious doctrine was not explicitly under debate, other factors shaping attitudes toward tradition came into play. Today William Temple's *Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690) is read almost exclusively as a contribution to the "quarrel of the ancients and moderns," but it is startling to reread it as a history of mediation. Temple addressed the question "Whether the Ancients or Moderns can be probably thought to have made the greatest Progress in the Search and Discoveries of the vast Region of Truth and Nature." But in so doing, he investigated "what Guides have been used, and what Labours imploy'd" (6–7). As a defender of the achievements of the ancients, he could hardly avoid entertaining the possibility of reliable oral traditions. But Temple was an Anglican statesman, and he published the essay in the immediate aftermath of the heated oral-tradition debates of the 1680s and the Revolution of 1688. In this context, he appears remarkably open-minded about oral tradition. For Temple did more than argue for the superior contributions of the ancient Greeks and Romans: in an early version of comparative media studies, he argued for the reliability of elite, learned oral traditions in ancient societies across the globe. He discussed bardic and priestly knowledge transmission not only in Greece and Rome but also in the Americas (Mexico and Peru), Ireland, and "Eastern Regions" such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Persia,

Syria, India, and China. Controversially, he proposed that the Greeks owed much of their knowledge to their "Commerce" with Egypt, Phoenicia, and the Far East. In his own time (as readers of Swift's satires will recall) he was considered ridiculous for greatly admiring the learning of "eastern regions."[11] But for Temple the reliability of oral tradition was not so much a matter of geography or even of religion as it was of social rank. Temple valued elite, learned knowledge transmission by bards who passed down the wisdom of the ages in their otherwise "barbarous and rude" societies. In his account ancient, elite oral traditions are always superior, regardless of geographic origin. He particularly traced Western philosophy to "Indian Brachmans," whom he represented as bards "dedicated . . . to the Service of the Gods . . . and to the Council of their Princes" (9). As for the "Invention of Printing," Temple held that this celebrated modern technology had no necessary consequences for human advancement. He proposed that "Printing has not, perhaps, multiplied Books, but only . . . Copies" (3–4). Whereas Defoe associated printing with the multiplication of opportunities for readership across the social spectrum—and so, crucially, with challenges to tyranny and superstition—Temple held that more books did not necessarily mean better libraries (for gentlemen, at least). A good book was like an oral proverb: a distillation of knowledge and values tested by time: for "Books, like Proverbs, receive their Chief Value from the Stamp and Esteem of Ages through which they have passed" (4).

Seventy-five years after Stillingfleet's meditation on mediation, William Warburton published *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*.[12] At thirteen hundred pages, Warburton's tome differs in kind from Stillingfleet's politico-theological intervention or Defoe's popular synthesis. Yet like these predecessors, *The Divine Legation* is a history of mediation that links concerns of divine intercession and human communication. As a clergyman, Warburton was deeply concerned with mediation in both of these senses. Once again, the link between these concerns is the question of *traditio*, or the transmission of knowledge across time and space. Like Stillingfleet, Warburton devoted a substantial section of his history of mediation to the question of writing. But unlike Stillingfleet (and Defoe), he decisively rejected the notion that writing was a onetime gift from God. Placing all the world's writing systems along one developmental chain, he proposed that New World pictograms were an early stage of writing and that alphabetic writing was a relatively late one. Hieroglyphics had evolved from their earliest form, Mexican "picture writing" (fig. 2), to their Egyptian incarnation and finally to their most advanced stage, Chinese characters.[13] Warburton's theories of the development of writing greatly influenced later-eighteenth-century philosophes. In 1744 the (145-page) section of the *Divine Legation* devoted to hieroglyphics was translated as *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des égyptiens*. Two years later, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac acknowledged Warburton's theories in his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746): "from [Warburton's] work I have borrowed practically all I say about this subject" (178n48; pt. 2, sec. 13). Condillac's admission reminds us that while many European intellectuals were fascinated by the idea of hieroglyphics, only a tiny number had any real acquaintance with them. Faced with a dearth of direct examples, they worked with secondary sources and by conjecture from what was known. Hudson notes that what he (loosely) calls Warburton's "conjectural methodology" was "the same method later used by Condillac . . . , Adam Smith and others to trace the origin and history of speech" and the "flowering of developed speech and the alphabet" (55–56). But while Hudson does not pursue this insight further, I will go on now to suggest that there are significant, neglected links to be explored in detail by others between

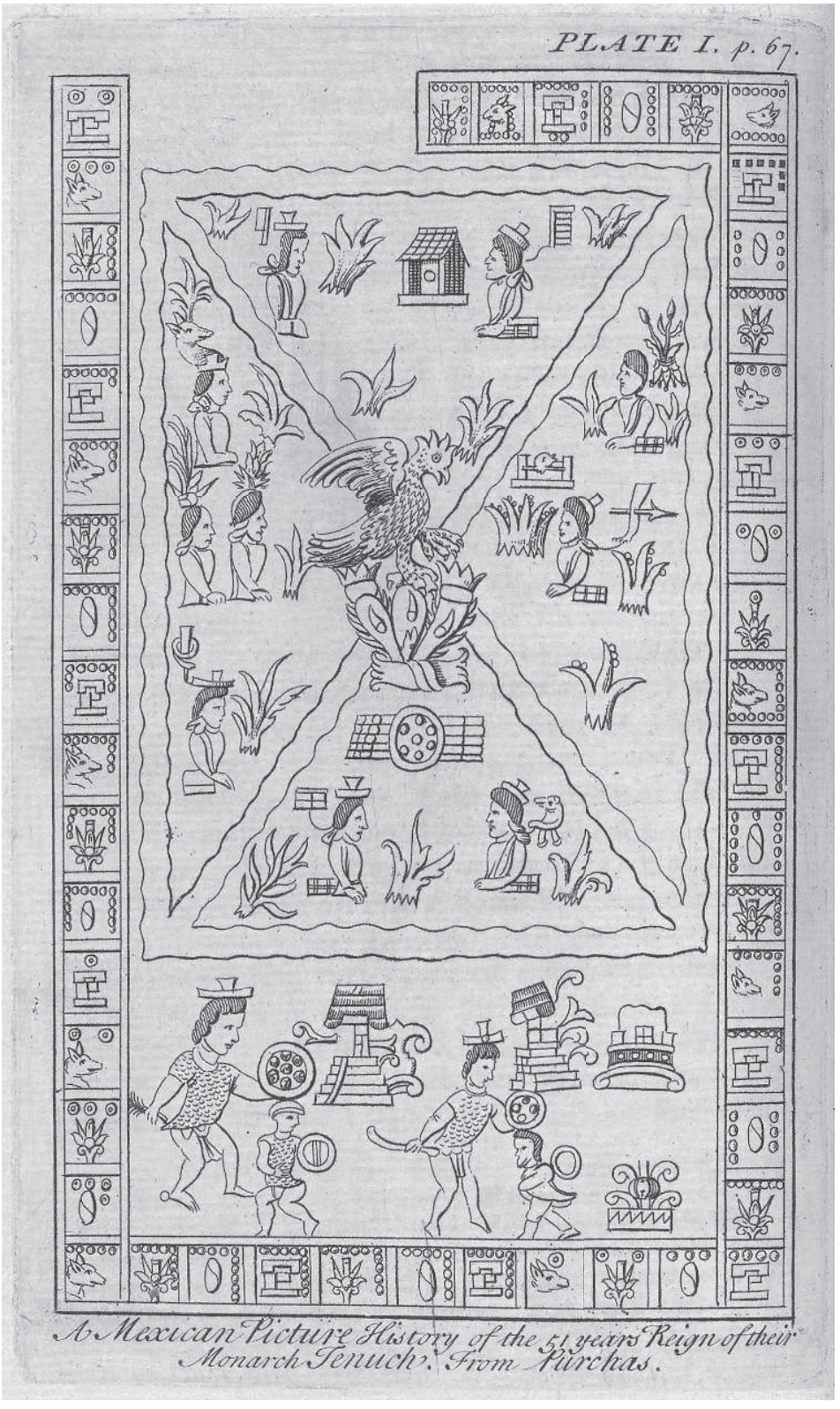

FIG. 2

"A Mexican Picture History," in Warburton's *The Divine Legation of Moses* (2: 67). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

the pointedly secular accounts of conjectural historians such as Smith, Condorcet, and the philosopher Dugald Stewart and earlier devout histories of mediation.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, a subset of moral philosophers retrospectively named "conjectural historians" developed a new model of human history. These theorists proposed that human societies progressed naturally through a succession of stages, each with its own characteristic institutions, economy, and social arrangements. This sequence was typically (but not always) viewed as "progress." The conventional four-stages model included hunter-gatherer, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial societies. But around the 1790s, we begin to detect the idea of communications technologies as part of this unfolding sequence. Stadial theorists linked phases in the development of societies not only to their mode of sustenance or production but also to advances in the history of communications, including the origins of language, the invention of writing, and the introduction and spread of printing. In his history of stadial theory, Ronald L. Meek suggests that "the sudden emergence of the four stages theory in France and Scotland in the 1750s, and its widespread acceptance and popularisation in the following decades, can hardly have been an accident: the time must . . . for some reason have been ripe for these events" (36). One reason that stadial theory "emerged" when it did, I propose, was the earlier emergence of developmental models of mediation. It is no accident that when Stewart coined the label "conjectural history" he pointed to Adam Smith's work on the origin of languages—rather than, say, his economic writings—as "a fine example of conjectural history."[14] Smith's 1761 lecture "Concerning the First Formation of Languages" was indebted to Condillac's *Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge* (1749), and (as we have seen) Condillac's *Essay* was greatly indebted to Warburton's *Divine Legation* (1738–41). Warburton's history of mediation, in turn, shares central concerns and features with Defoe's *EUL* (and so on). As this series of links suggests, the emergence of a stadial (and increasingly secular) theory of the development of human communication was by no means "sudden."

By 1780 most histories of mediation were stadial histories, beginning with the acquisition of language and ending with the spread of print. In 1784 Thomas Astle, a state record keeper, published *The Origin and Progress of Writing . . . Also Some Account of the Origin and Progress of Printing.* Astle's work has rightly been described as "an authoritative source for the history of writing well into the nineteenth century" (Ramsay), but, once again, classifying this kind of work as a history of writing fails to acknowledge what it actually does. Astle's history of mediation shares many concerns with Defoe's *EUL* (the origin of letters, the nature of hieroglyphics, the sociopolitical implications of printing, and so on). But, unlike Defoe's text, Astle's *Origin and Progress* is explicitly evolutionary. Whereas Defoe insisted that "the first writing" was a divine gift, Astle (boldly) titled a section of his work "Alphabetic Writing Not First Communicated to Moses, Nor of Divine Original" (10). Strikingly, too, Astle had no qualms about placing "brute[s]," "savages," and "man," as well as their forms of communication, along one hierarchical evolutionary chain. In the opening sentence of his work, he declared, "The noblest acquisition of mankind is SPEECH, and the most useful art is WRITING. The first, eminently distinguishes MAN from the brute creation; the second, from uncivilized savages" (1). In this sense, Astle's stadial history of mediation anticipates nineteenth-century biological models of the evolution of humankind.

From the 1790s on, theorists of mediation increasingly suggested that shifts in communication practices and tools themselves triggered stages in history. In 1792 Stewart asserted that "the invention of printing" was the

"single event, independently of every other" that was "sufficient to change the whole course of human affairs" (*Elements* 242). Meanwhile, across the English Channel, the fugitive philosopher the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94) was penning his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*. After Condorcet died in prison, this work was translated into English as *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). Meek suggests that Condorcet was influenced by conventional stadial theory, but he rightly detects that the philosopher was doing something different: he "use[d] the traditional . . . stages scheme merely as a convenient starting-point from which to branch out into a new sequential scheme of an entirely different character" (208). Meek does not develop this observation further, but I would argue that Condorcet's *Sketch*, while ostensibly tracing the "progress of the human mind," is also a history of mediation whose key stages are triggered by medial developments. Condorcet not only divided human history into ages; he also systematically linked stages of social development to stages in the development of communications. As in Defoe's *EUL*, so in Condorcet's stadial history each new invention or major discovery seems to trigger or enable a new age. The "Third Stage" covers "up to the invention of the alphabet," the "Seventh Stage" includes "the progress of science . . . to the invention of printing," and the "Eighth Stage" addresses humans' development "from the invention of printing to the time when philosophy and the sciences shook off the yoke of authority." In a move that anticipates the (now-much-critiqued) "Great Divide" model of "orality and literacy," Condorcet divided the history of humankind into a before and after of alphabetic writing, then he represented these two stages as the "two great eras of the human race" (9). As a secular French philosophe, Condorcet was the product of an Enlightenment tradition different from that of the diverse English authors I have discussed here. Nonetheless, he too was centrally concerned with *traditio*. Expressing skepticism toward oral tradition and praising letters as the superior means of communicating knowledge across generations, Condorcet declared that human development "would have been impossible if there had not been men who understood the art of writing, *the only method of establishing and maintaining a tradition, of communicating and transmitting knowledge as it grows*" (36; my italics).[15]

To date, there is little scholarship on Defoe's *EUL*,[16] and his most recent biographers have said almost nothing about it. Paula R. Backscheider's nearly 700-page biography of Defoe and John J. Richetti's *The Life of Daniel Defoe: A Critical Biography* do not even mention the work, and in his 750-page biography of Defoe, Maximillian E. Novak comments on it only briefly, describing it as a work "about what we would now call the semiotics of writing" and as "Defoe's first full-length attack upon the position of the deists" (656). Yet no Defoe scholar has ever questioned (in print) that he wrote *EUL*. Even the ardent Defoe de-attributionists P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens, who argued that the Defoe canon should be slashed almost in half (by some 252 items), have never questioned Defoe's authorship of this text (*Canonisation* and *Defoe De-Attributions*). In fact, Furbank recently edited *EUL* for the Pickering and Chatto collection *The Works of Daniel Defoe*—the most authoritative edition of his writings to date—surely a sign of its general scholarly acceptance into the Defoe canon.

EUL has *Literature* in its title, yet, paradoxically, it would not be classified that way today by many literary scholars (particularly those for whom *literature* is an honorary term indicating special aesthetic merit). In discussing other writings by Defoe dating to the later 1720s, Richetti describes Defoe's "powers of coherence" as declining into "an intolerable prolixity" (157). Of *A Plan of the*

English Commerce (1728) he declares that there is "a kind of nearly demented pedantry in this book" (159). Although Richetti never mentions *EUL*, one suspects that in his view this work would warrant the same verdict. *EUL* is repetitive and digressive (hardly an unfamiliar charge against Defoe). It is also a wide-ranging survey of a vast area of knowledge. But this kind of synthesis, aimed at a popular audience eager for intellectual improvement, was a huge growth area in the eighteenth-century book trade. Furthermore, the recent trend in eighteenth-century studies has been to take seriously the entrepreneurial authors and publishers of such works. William Hazlitt, Jr., did not find Defoe's text pedantic or derivative; in fact, he praised it as useful and original, and the text's more recent editor, P. N. Furbank, observes that Defoe's own "claim to be doing something new . . . could indeed be said to be a fair one, at least as regards Britain." In 1726 there were publications on hieroglyphics, penmanship, and cryptography; schemes for a universal language; and discussions of printing (many of which Defoe consulted). "But there was really no comprehensive survey. The closest parallel . . . is perhaps the *De Arte Grammatica* of Vossius (the learned Dutch scholar G. J. Voss) . . . first published in 1635" (Introd. 9–10).

Johnson defined *literature* as "learning; skill in letters" ("Literature"). Throughout the eighteenth century, *literature* still commonly referred to writing in general or to "fine writing" of any kind. Johnson, for instance, remarked that John Milton's father "had probably more than common literature" (*Lives* 1: 242). For Defoe in *EUL*, *literature* essentially meant writing. One hundred years later, the rise of modern disciplinary divisions would usher in a new, narrower definition of *literature*, as a subset of the broader category of writing; *literature* was increasingly restricted to creative or imaginative works (especially fiction, poetry, and drama). But, as Raymond Williams observed in 1976, these post-Romantic notions of "*literature* and *literary*" have long since "been . . . challenged on what is conventionally their own ground, by concepts of *writing* and *communication* which seek to recover the most active senses which the extreme specialization had seemed to exclude" (187). Today it is possible to see the "media turn" in literary studies, and the proliferation of related work in book history, print-culture studies, and the digital humanities, as signs of a return to an earlier, more capacious notion of literary activity.

By reading Defoe's work not as an example of "paraliterature" or "bad" writing but as an important transitional text in a longer lineage of what I have called histories of mediation, I hope to support Hazlitt's case that this little-known text deserves a wider audience.[17] As we have seen, he observed that "the English language had produced but few publications on the subject." But, significantly, we can now recognize that Hazlitt never quite states what that subject is. Defoe's ostensible subject is letters, but I have argued that it is more helpful to read *EUL* as a history of mediation (in more than one sense of that term) than as a history of writing. Recalling the slow historical emergence of what Guillory calls the "media concept," it now makes sense that there was no comprehensive history of mediation before Defoe: our modern concepts of media and mediation, while emergent in *EUL*, did not yet exist. Only in our own time has the crystallization of these concepts allowed us to make sense of compelling questions that were formerly inexpressible. As Guillory writes, "[S]omething has become visible that before could not be seen" ("Genesis" 324). Today digital archives such as *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* give us access to many more of Defoe's texts, calling on us to assess our own evaluative criteria and classification schemes. Electronic resources allow us to analyze early modern authors such as Defoe, Stillingfleet, and Warburton not only as theorists of mediation but also as subjects in the history of

mediation. *EUL* tries to merge scripture-based histories of mediation with a new progressive model of the development of human communications. In turn, Defoe's attempt to articulate a nascent area of intellectual inquiry before it was fully visible provokes us to think through the challenges and opportunities we face as we historicize our textual classifications and hierarchies in the digital "age."

Notes

1. William Hone to John Childs, 3 Feb. 1819 (Wu 265).

2. "To Walter Wilson." William Hazlitt the essayist (1778–1830) was in fact one of a long line of literary William Hazlitts, all of them published authors who were strongly influenced by Dissenting thought. (Defoe was a Dissenter.) William Hazlitt, Jr., (1811–93) followed his father into the literary trade. Along with *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Daniel De Foe* (1830), by Walter Wilson, a historian of Nonconformism, Hazlitt's *Works of Daniel De Foe* marks an important turning point in Defoe's critical reception. Hereafter, I refer to William Hazlitt, Jr., as Hazlitt and to his father as Hazlitt the essayist.

As I suggest in my essay's conclusion, the question of what a "complete collection" of Defoe's works would look like is a matter of intense critical debate today.

3. "Life" 1: cxvi. Hazlitt dedicated his edition to Wilson, on whose extensive personal library of Defoe's works it was largely based. The passage I quote here is Hazlitt's rewriting and condensing of Wilson's discussion of *EUL* in *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Daniel De Foe*. Hazlitt evidently agreed with his father that Wilson's biography was much too long; one of the essayist's last publications was a review of Wilson's work that begins, "This is a very good book, but spun out to too great a length. Mr. Wilson will not bate an inch of his right to be tediously minute" (Rev. 397).

4. In Hazlitt's day, *kind* and *species* were terms for what we now call genre.

5. Guillory, "Genesis" 321; see also Guillory, "Enlightening Mediation."

6. *EUL* was also distributed by John Clark, a bookseller at the Royal Exchange.

7. *EUL* 273. A possible exception here is Defoe's description of a system of communication employing bundles of knotted reeds—a description that vaguely evokes the knotted strings of Andean quipu (234).

8. Reed notes that "Defoe bemoans the seduction of ancient civilization by oral myth" (48), but otherwise our approaches to *EUL* are different. Reed contends that *EUL* was chiefly an attempt to refute the deist John Toland. He suggests that Defoe was arguing that Toland's views threatened England's glory as a commercial nation by undermining the established church. But this argument is complicated (as Reed admits) by Defoe's own status as a Dissenter. I agree with Furbank that "since Toland is never mentioned" in *EUL*, Reed's thesis "seems too speculative" (General History 324n5).

9. Defoe, *Tour* 3: 139. On the association of Catholicism and oral tale-telling, see Walsham, "'Domme Preachers'?" and "Reformed Folklore," and Shell.

10. Sergeant 108. John Sergeant, a Catholic, was responding to Stillingfleet as well as to John Tillotson. This is the earliest use of *orality* listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Orality").

11. In *Battel of the Books* (1704), Swift depicts the moderns as angry with the ancients on Mount Parnassus for spoiling their "Prospects . . . especially towards the *East*" (Walsh 144).

12. Warburton's work is the springboard for Derrida's essay "Scribble," originally written as the preface to a reissue of the 1744 translation of Warburton's *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des égyptiens*. On Derrida and eighteenth-century European ideas about writing, see Hudson.

13. Before the nineteenth century, Europeans commonly used *hieroglyphics* to describe forms of picture-based writing not only in Egypt but also in China and the New World.

14. Stewart first used the term "conjectural history" in "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," a lecture he delivered to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society in 1793 and later printed ("Account").

15. Condorcet's *Sketch* has recently received renewed attention as a touchstone in the debate between Eisenstein and Adrian Johns about "print culture." Eisenstein argues that Renaissance authors saw printing as inaugurating a new era in humankind's development, while Johns counters that Condorcet's *Sketch* "presented the first full manifestation of the press as a unique force for historical transformation" (373). But I would suggest that recognizing histories of mediation as a genre that was emergent by the eighteenth century offers a much-needed route beyond this impasse. To be sure, the invention of printing figures prominently in the triumphalist claims of early modern authors such as Martin Luther and John Foxe. But, by the later eighteenth century, meditations on the world-historical force of medial developments (including printing) are recognizable as a genre: a grouping of a distinct *kind* of text. Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1583) includes a homage to printing that anticipates Condorcet's but is not devoted to assessing the consequences of what we might now call media shift (as Condorcet's *Sketch* arguably is).

16. An exception is Reed's "Nationalism and Geoculture in Defoe's History of Writing."

17. As Ashley Marshall—herself a Defoe de-attributionist—writes, "[T]he Pickering and Chatto

edition will run to forty-four volumes . . . only ten of which are the 'novels.' . . . [W]e need . . . to use the other thirty-four volumes . . . to do more than just illuminate the fiction" (27).

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