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Joyce Coleman

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I

On beyond Ong: the bases of a revised theory of orality and literacy

Over the past three decades, the study of medieval literature has been increasingly influenced by theories of orality and literacy. Concepts developed to describe the impact of alphabetic script on ancient Greece have been generally adopted and extended to describe the impact of rising literacy and advancing book-technologies on medieval Europe. The theories seem to have provided a reliable means of explaining the transmutation of English texts from the time of the *scops* through the assiduous literacy of the Ricardian period and the outbreking individualism of the English Renaissance. At each stage, as literacy rose and orality declined, literature inscribed itself more deeply as a locus of self-awareness, irony, and conscious artifice. Chaucer, particularly, is often held to express in his writings a sophistication enabled by his newly literate, privately reading audience.

My intent in this book is to dismantle that neat schema. There is no denying the progressive rise of literacy and improvement of book-technology over the course of the later Middle Ages, nor would I seek to strip Chaucer of his sophistication or the Renaissance of its individualism. I will simply try to demonstrate that the two sequences do not harmonize as closely as is often assumed. The achievements of Chaucer and the Renaissance writers cannot represent the triumph of literacy over orality, because orality was present in force for both periods. This orality was not a contaminant detracting from literacy, a superseded mentality at war with its successor, or the inert residue of an extinct modality, but a vital, functioning, accepted part of a mixed oral-literate literary tradition. Although equated frequently with a “transitional” period of low literacy and limited access to manuscripts, aurality – i.e., the reading aloud of written literature to one or a group of listeners – was in fact the modality of choice for highly literate and sophisticated audiences, not only in ancient Greece and

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Rome but also among the nobility of England, Scotland, France, and Burgundy from (at least) the fourteenth through the late fifteenth century. In these different places and times, public reading proceeded in different ways, under different auspices, and to different ends, attesting to its complexity and richness as a means of experiencing literature.

The slow growth over the fourteenth through the late fifteenth century of a more individualized, less synthetic mentality was, no doubt, related to the slowly escalating habit of private reading; but the result for this crucial period was a growing sophistication of *both* private and public reading. Even if it were true – which it is not – that aurality did ultimately die out completely, we should not use that pseudo-fact as a reason for ignoring aurality during periods in which it flourished. The habit of approaching late medieval literature with the standard oral/literate polarities ready-mapped before our faces, sure the data will fit the map, has led us down some debatable paths. If we are willing to adopt a more “ethnographic” approach, following the texts as they draw their own map for us, we will identify not a triumphal, quick-step march from “orality” to “literacy,” but a long-term, intricate interdigitation of the oral, the aural, and the literate.

Because the standard theories of orality and literacy have underwritten so many “chronocentric” analyses of medieval literature, this chapter will seek to expose some key weaknesses in that argument, as formulated by the general theorists and by scholars working specifically with medieval material. In the place of these excessively rigid and prescriptive models, I will draw on the more open-ended and multimodal theories of Ruth Finnegan and other social scientists. Finally, having cleared away some of the theoretical obstructions, I will attempt to suggest the uniqueness and interest of late medieval aurality.

THE FOUNDATIONAL TEXTS OF ORALITY/LITERACY THEORY

Aurality is a phenomenon that has traditionally been marginalized by its centrality; that is, since it occupies a historical and conceptual middle space between the two poles of “orality” and “literacy,” attention has rarely focused on aurality itself.¹ This is a bias built into the founding premises of the standard theory, as developed by Eric Havelock in *A Preface to Plato* (1963); by Jack Goody and Ian Watt in “The consequences of literacy” (1963) and by Jack Goody in

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subsequent studies; and by Walter Ong in publications (1965; 1971) culminating in his famous *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

Havelock theorized that the Greeks' invention of the first fully alphabetic script brought about a revolution in consciousness and in the means of recording cultural knowledge. Oral poets such as Homer, he claims, created compendia designed to preserve in memorable fashion the key concepts, history, and even technical knowledge of their culture. Writing meant that records could be created and, over time, checked and compared. Thus began an analytical consciousness that learned, for example, to detect contradictions in two accounts of the same event, and that could venture out past the easily memorized and assimilated to more complex and esoteric thought.

Like Havelock, Goody and Watt focused on the invention of an alphabetic script in ancient Greece, but their analysis drew as well on observations from cultures such as the LoDagaa of Ghana (among whom Goody had done fieldwork). Goody and Watt identified a "homeostatic tendency" in oral cultures, whereby "whatever parts of it [the cultural heritage] have ceased to be of contemporary relevance are likely to be eliminated by the process of forgetting" (1963, rpt. 1968: 30). The classic example is the genealogy that evolves over time to emphasize important connections and drop undesirable or irrelevant ones. Once literacy arrives and written records accumulate, however, comparison encourages a critical attitude and "a sense of change and of cultural lag" (p. 49). To this process Goody and Watt attribute the development of, among other things, logic, taxonomic classification, history, and self-awareness. To explain why some literate societies failed to develop this precise complex of traits, Goody later argued that literacy could be "restricted" by various counter-forces (1968b).

Finally, in applying the model advanced by Havelock and by Goody and Watt to later Western society, Ong added two crucial factors. The first was to assume that the consequences attendant on the introduction of writing to a nonliterate society would also affect a relatively less literate society as it became relatively more literate. Thus the emphasis shifted from "literacy" in the sense of possessing writing at all to "literacy" in a vaguer sense of how many or how well people could read.

Ong's second innovation was diachronicity. Whereas Havelock's and Goody and Watt's analyses had focused on one relatively discrete, synchronic event (the introduction of an alphabetic script to

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ancient Greece, or of literacy to a modern nonliterate society), Ong envisioned a cultural evolution stretching from the time of “pristine” or “primary orality” through the classical period, the fall of Rome, the early and late Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the invention of printing, the Reformation, Romanticism, the Industrial Revolution, and finally the invention of radio, television, and other electronic media, which inaugurated our current era of “secondary orality.” Each stage of this long process was marked by some further intensification of the consequences of literacy. Ong’s frequently invoked concept of “oral residue” served to explain any seemingly “oral” traits (such as aspects of Renaissance rhetoric) that persisted into a later stage of development; any such lag is also likely to be explained with the comment that the society had not “fully interiorized” literacy (e.g., 1982: 26).

Drawing on research done by Alexander Luria in the 1930s (trans. 1976), Ong offers a checklist that defines “oral” as: additive rather than subordinative; aggregative; redundant or “copious”; conservative or traditionalist; close to the human lifeworld; agonistically toned; empathetic and participatory; homeostatic; and situational (Ong 1982: 36–57). The history of the transition from orality to (pre-electronic) literacy is reflected in the gradual development of the contrasting “literate” qualities in individuals, cultures, and literatures.

The elegant analyses of Havelock, Goody and Watt, and Ong seem to have exposed a fundamental shaping mechanism of human culture and consciousness. Many apparently disparate events – plus the whole burst of genius we associate with ancient Greece – found a systematic and supple explanation in the mnemonic shift entailed by the introduction of the first fully vocalic alphabet. Ong’s extension of this paradigm across the span of Western history gave a gratifying prominence to the Middle Ages, during which Europe climbed back from the near-total nonliteracy of the “barbaric” age through many crucial stages, climaxing in the invention of printing.

Although Jack Goody, in particular, has attempted to modify the universality of this schema (see, e.g., Goody 1968b, 1987), the master theory has remained so consistently attractive – to its originator as to others – that, as Brian Street notes, “it is . . . the grand claims rather than the caveats that other writers tend to follow” (1984: 52). As reflected in the work of influential theorists of medieval orality and literacy such as Paul Zumthor, Franz Bäuml, Brian Stock, and Paul Saenger – and in research such as that presented in the anthology *Vox*

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Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages (ed. Doane and Pasternack, 1991), which may be considered indicative of much recent work in the field – many scholars of medieval literature have accepted these theoretical structures as adequate and productive for the analysis of many different periods, languages, and genres.

CRITIQUES OF “LITERACY THEORY”

The confidence of literary scholars in orality/literacy theory may, however, be somewhat misplaced. While the theory falls in readily with the training, focus, and prejudices of such scholars, social scientists were quick to call attention to the ethnocentricity and rigidity of its categories. Only recently have literary scholars such as Gabrielle Spiegel (1991), Paul Goetsch (1991), and D. H. Green (1990, 1994) begun to echo these criticisms.

The ready reliance accorded the model by many medievalists has had dire consequences for their ability to conceptualize aurality. If aurality is to regain the importance it deserves as a long-standing, sophisticated means of experiencing medieval literature, we need to examine the inadequacies that underlie, at every step, the smooth flow of the standard theory’s premises.

Polar divides

The standard theory envisions orality and literacy as two rigidly differentiated entities, each identified with an equally distinct, invariable set of cognitive and literary traits. There is little room for a conceptual middle ground between these two poles of the “Great Divide” (Finnegan 1973). Since aurality must lie, if anywhere, in this middle ground, it fits into medievalists’ schemes, if at all, usually as a symptom of transition – as a residual holdover from orality or (alternatively) as a herald of literacy. In either case, it naturally attracts little attention on its own. To build a case for aurality’s status as an independent phenomenon, we must disassemble the mechanisms of polarization.

According to the standard theory of orality and literacy, the advent of writing systems, or each increment of improved writing-technology, necessarily transforms the way people think and create. Moreover, these changes always run in the same direction: from the synthetic, communalizing “oral” towards the analytic, individualistic

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“literate.” A corollary of this “technological determinism” (Finnegan 1988: 8), frequently applied in discussions of medieval culture, suggests that where increased literacy (or increments thereof) can be detected, one may assume that cognitive functions or literary sophistication also increased. Conversely, where enhanced cognition or sophistication can be detected, one may assume that some increment of literacy was the cause. Having identified a technological shift (the reintroduction of word-spacing), for example, Paul Saenger (1982) deduces that cognitive advances must have resulted. Brian Stock (1983), having identified certain cognitive “advances” (basically, an increasingly intellectual and empirical attitude toward texts), deduces that literacy must have increased. Both deductions may well be correct, but in both cases they are underdiscussed, the authors considering their deterministic premises self-evident and self-validating.

But why should the technology of writing be the only factor affecting human thinking and creativity? Critics of this assumption have noted many other possible influences: economic systems (Gough 1968); judicial, political, and religious institutions (G. E. R. Lloyd, cited in Goody 1968b: 63–71); social organization, urbanization, schooling, and the characteristics of particular scripts (Scribner and Cole 1981). Many medievalists are happy to credit Chaucer’s breakthroughs to rising literacy and improving book production. But few apply that logic to the succeeding period, in which writers “re-medievalized” despite an unbroken upward curve of technological gain, including the invention of printing. Those who confront the issue have to call on other factors, such as a conservatism fostered by religious persecution (see, e.g., Spearing 1985: 89).

Nor, when technology changes, does it necessarily produce effects that run in the approved direction. Finnegan points out that printing, for example, “can be – and has been – used for enlightenment *and* for mystification; for self-expression or rebellion *and* for repression; for systematic analysis and the development of knowledge on the one hand *and* for obfuscation, dogma and the propagation of prejudice and intolerance on the other.” A technology’s effects, she concludes, “depend on how people actually use it and how it interacts with a large number of other factors in the current situation” (1988: 163).

The weakness of the case for technological determinism can be nowhere better illustrated than in the society that the theory was

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generated to describe: ancient Greece. The anthropologist Brian Street (1984: chap. 2) has painstakingly unraveled Goody's logic to reveal that, even within the terms of the argument as Goody presents it, the introduction of writing did not have the global transformative effects claimed for it. At one point, for example, Goody quotes Havelock's comment that the pre-Socratics (of the sixth century BC) were "essentially oral thinkers" and, explaining this as a result of restricted literacy, claims that the true breakthrough came in the time of Plato (fifth–fourth century BC) (Goody 1968b: 3–4). But then, Street argues, the true breakthrough could not have been a consequence only of literacy: "What happened between early and later Greek society to generate these developments must have been something other than the 'intrinsic' qualities of literacy alone since literacy was present in both periods" – without, it may be noted, any of the restricting factors identified by Goody (1984: 63).

Classicists have echoed the anthropologists' objections. William V. Harris dismisses the arguments of Havelock and Goody as "woolly and grandiose" (1989: 41), concluding that "the accumulation of texts was a necessary though not sufficient condition for many of the literary and intellectual achievements of the classical world" (p. 336). Rosalind Thomas is similarly dismissive, noting "it is not enough to observe the presence of literacy without considering its uses ... there is a complex mixture of both oral and written processes which persists long after the initial introduction of writing" (1989: 30).

Besides having to interact with other social factors to achieve, if it did achieve, its startling transformations, ancient Greek literacy had the further, little-noted disadvantage of being chiefly aural. Goody and Watt themselves remark that "in the ancient world books were used mainly for reading aloud, often by a slave" (1963, rpt. 1968: 42; see also Saenger 1991: 209) – to literate, upper-class listeners, of course. No one seems to have wondered how the often-cited ability to examine, compare, and jump around in texts (see, e.g., Goody 1977: 44) can be held responsible for the intellectual advances of the ancient Greeks, when most or all of the ancient Greeks were in fact hearing their texts read aloud.

Certainly, the "professional" intellectuals and writers may well have read books privately, in order to study them and write their own. Xenophon quotes Socrates as saying "that he was accustomed to unroll the treasures of the sages of old times which they had left in books written by them, and to study and mark extracts from them

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with his friends” (quoted in Kenyon 1932: 21). Kenyon notes that even such reports as this (in which Socrates, though reading, was not alone) are in the minority: “it must be admitted,” he says, “that the general picture which we have, both in Plato and in Xenophon, is of oral instruction and conversation, not of reading and private study” (ibid.).

Medievalists who have adopted the literacy model are accustomed to dismissing aurality in *their* period as “oral residue.” The very basis of the theory they are relying on so implicitly, however, seems to offer aurality as a potential source of, or at least as no hindrance to, major cognitive transformations. Thus even the foundational case of the foundational writers fails to conform to their determinative premises. If advances in writing-technology do not automatically dictate a move towards more “literate” thought and behavior (including private reading), then it becomes conceivable that rising literacy and improved book-technology in Chaucer’s period and later need not have automatically resulted in the abandonment of aurality, or public reading. Moreover, if the ancient Greeks could combine aurality with sophisticated thought and composition, it should be less of a surprise to find medieval English people doing likewise.

The tendency to link the state of writing-technology to states of human mentality is much facilitated by a homology of terminology: “oral” (nonliterate) societies are said to be “oral” (aggregative, synthetic, etc.) in character, while “literacy” (the presence or improvement of writing-technologies) supposedly brings “literate” (individualistic, analytic, etc.) traits in its wake. The semantic and conceptual equation of technology with mentality prepares us to accept technological change as a necessary and sufficient predictor of cultural transformation.

This logic was codified for many scholars in Walter Ong’s master-list of “oral” and “literate” traits (see above), whose development he aligns unquestioningly with the technological progression of book-technology. Many medievalists have accepted this checklist as definitive and authoritative, and have applied it freely in their work – invoking Ong’s concept of “oral residue” to explain away any apparent overlap of traits. In some cases, analyses of texts degenerate into mere exercises in imposing the list’s prescriptive and self-fulfilling categories: e.g., identifying anything “aggregative” as “oral,” and anything “analytic” as “literate.” Even important and learned discus-

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sions of key stylistic elements (such as fictionality) supposedly unique to “literacy” turn out to be based on no stronger support than Ong’s assertions.

But Ong’s assertions, as it turns out, are themselves very far from strongly based. In *The Psychology of Literacy*, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) point out an important ambiguity in the work of Ong’s key source for this list, Alexander Luria. In comparing illiterate Soviet peasants to others recently educated as part of a government campaign in the 1930s, Luria had found that the first group tended to respond to the experimental tasks “in a concrete, context-bound way, guided by the perceptual and functional attributes of things. The most schooled group, on the other hand, tended to take an abstract approach and be responsive to the conceptual and logical relationships among things” (Ong 1982: 10).

While these results fit the Great Divide view of literacy’s effects, Scribner and Cole note, Luria’s test situation did not allow him to differentiate the effects of various covariables from those of literacy per se. Schooling was one chief covariable – the peasants may have begun to think more abstractly because their teachers encouraged them to do so, not because literacy in and of itself always engenders such forms of thinking. Students who were taught to group words into taxonomic classes, for example, would gain skills not necessarily acquired simply by learning to write the words “dog,” “cat,” or “animal.”

In a six-year field-study among the Vai people of Liberia, who may be literate in Arabic, English, or their own syllabic script, Scribner and Cole were able to compare the effects of nonliteracy, non-schooled literacy, and literacy learned under two different forms of schooling. They found that in each case, the effects reflected the particular nature of the script, the way it is learned, and how it is used. Abstract reasoning and other traits so often associated with the acquisition of literacy of any sort turned out to be consistently fostered among the Vai by only one form of literacy – that in English, the language learned in formal Western-style schools (pp. 242–44).

Scribner and Cole conclude by advocating “a practice account of literacy,” for which

literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. Thus, in order to identify the consequences of

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literacy, we need to consider the specific characteristics of specific practices. (pp. 235–37)

Scribner and Cole's work suggests that Ong's supposedly universal list of "oral" and "literate" traits in fact describes (and extrapolates from) only one specific context of literacy: that of modern Western society. Western liberal education certainly does tend to encourage analytical, logical, de-homeostatizing, and other "literate" ways of thinking. But there seems to be little basis for assuming that literacy alone, however acquired, will invariably produce similar effects – or that nonliterate are necessarily denied them.

Critics of standard orality/literacy theory have documented many instances of traits skipping freely across the notional boundaries drawn by the theorists. Finnegan notes that the nonliterate Limba, of Sierra Leone, "possess and exploit abstract terms and forms; and they reflect on and about language and have media for standing back from the immediate scene or the immediate form of words through their terminology, their philosophy of language and their literature" (1988: 55).

Finnegan also offers many illustrations of oral compositions that demonstrate the traits generally declared possible only for written texts. An Eskimo poet, for example, seems as conscious of his creative processes as Mallarmé: "I wonder why / My song-to-be that I wish to use, / My song-to-be that I wish to put together, / I wonder why it will not come to me?" (p. 64). A Tikopian (Western Pacific) islander ironically parodies the language of religious converts by declaring, "My mind is dark / Why don't I abandon it?" (p. 67). Oral poetry achieves esthetic distance, Finnegan notes, via special castes of poets or special poetic languages, the offsetting of critiques onto animal protagonists, and special performance conventions (p. 165).

Scholars who eagerly analyze the *Iliad's* formulas, lists, and heroic type-characters as the pattern of primary orality are usually rather silent as to the *Odyssey* – whose wily hero tricks Polyphemos by labeling himself "No one" yet cannot resist shouting out his real name as his ship pulls away; who has himself tied to a mast so he can hear the Sirens; who alone of his crew escapes swinehood; and who when shipwrecked would rather trust a broken piece of raft than a goddess' magic veil. How does all this rampant individualism square with what Ong calls "the pristine aggregative, paratactic, oral-style