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# Constructed and Reconstructed Discourse: Inscription and Talk in the History of Literacy

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# Constructed and Reconstructed Discourse: Inscription and Talk in the History of Literacy

## **Abstract**

This article considers a theoretical problem at the center of historical research on literacy, the solution to which has implications for studies of contemporary literacies as well. Four models of literacy are identified. The (1) traditionally received skills model still flourishes in educational policy, but is increasingly rejected by literacy scholars who employ either (2) a functional model of literacy as an instrument of power relations or (3) a semiotic “marker” model of literacy. While traditional communications history has evinced little interest in historical studies of literacy, (4) a highly visible grand theory model of literacy associated with McLuhan, Innis, and Ong has its origins in the received model. Where the received model is optimistic about the long-term social and political effects of literacy, however, the grand theory model is pessimistic. Although a growing body of scholars has argued that the definition of any literacy must be located in its actual practices, and although many scholars now believe that oral-literate dichotomies are overly simple historical categories, this article takes that thinking farther and argues that literacy does not merely coexist or interact with oral practices and skills, but includes them. That is, the definition of literacy consists in the written and oral practices and skills, but includes them. That is, the definition of literacy consists in the written and oral practices organized around texts in a particular culture. Support for this argument is taken from pertinent evidence in the history of literacy.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Constructed and Reconstructed Discourse Inscription and Talk in the History of Literacy

Carolyn Marvin, University of Pennsylvania

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An ambitious but not incorrect definition of communications history makes it the study of all past human discourse. If so, one of the tasks of communication historians is to point out missing pieces of the conversation. In that spirit, let us examine scholarship on the history of literacy.

The explicit argument here concerns a problem in the conceptualization of literacy<sup>1</sup> in historical research—specifically, whether the usual distinction between "orality" and "literacy" is tenable and, since I will argue that it is not, how the relationship between inscription and talk might be more usefully approached. The resolution of the problem has consequences not only for studies of past and present literacy, but also for some major assumptions of one of the more visible theoretical streams of communications history.

### MODELS OF LITERACY

We can set up the argument as it bears especially on communications history by briefly surveying several current models for the study of literacy.

#### 1. RECEIVED MODEL

What can fairly be called the traditionally received model of literacy, descended from the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment, has been challenged in the last decade by scholars from many different research traditions including communications, history, psychology, and anthropology. According to the received model, literacy is defined as some criterion of skill in reading and writing. For subscribers to the model the important literacy debate concerns which combination of skills at which level of proficiency constitutes "true" literacy, since a range of desired effects issue automatically from its achievement. In particular, literacy has been considered a prerequisite for the development of higher intellectual and logical processes generally defined in terms of a capacity for abstract thought, decontextualization,

propositional logic, or psychic mobility (see, e.g., Olson, 1977a; Lerner, 1958; Goody, 1977; Scribner and Cole, 1981: 8-19). Students of the received model have frequently assumed that mastery of literate skills is a transparent indicator of intellectual achievement, neither historically nor culturally contingent. In part this was because the received model grows out of an attachment to a high culture tradition assumed in theory to be a universal concomitant of liberal democratic institutions, and bent in practice on obliterating historical and cultural distinctions if found difficult to tolerate while preserving the admired elite tradition.

What literacy skills could do for a single individual, they were assumed to be able to do many times over for entire societies. This sentiment is starkly (and typically) presented in a statement made as recently as 1977 by educational psychologist David Olson: "The faculty of language stands at the center of our conception of mankind; speech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized" (Olson, 1977b). In this respect, the received model exhibits a consistency through the centuries. The efforts of Reformation clerics to save the souls of sixteenth-century German peasants through Bible-reading (Strauss, 1978), the efforts of nineteenth-century Indian School Service teachers to achieve the miracle of racial assimilation by substituting for the traditional oral law of Indian nations respect for the written property law of white men (Sinex, 1984) and current universal literacy programs sponsored by UNESCO and other international agencies in Third World countries (UNESCO, 1980, 1978, 1975) have all been justified by appeal to a belief that literacy is an achievement from which automatic powers and benefits flow.

Experience and evidence alike suggest that whatever literacy is, its acquisition and practice are more complicated than the categories of the received model suggest. How to modify the received model to reflect that complexity has had two solutions, generally speaking, in historical research. One is a functional model of literacy as an instrument of power relations between those who define a discourse, and those who are selectively admitted to it or excluded from it altogether. The other is a semiotic model that treats literacy as a culturally specific code that varies as cultures vary. There is also a long-standing "grand theory" of communication history that addresses literacy squarely in the tradition of the received model, except that where the received model is optimistic, this model is pessimistic. We shall examine each of these.

## **2. POWER MODEL**

Revisionist challenges to the received model originate in observations that the salient point about literacy in the lives of most people is that opportunities for acquiring and practicing it are selectively distributed or withheld more by social station than individual talent. In this view, literacy is less a means for diffusing and sharing power than a device for its exercise over the many by the few, a "myth," to use Harvey Graff's term, rationalized within a rhetoric of democratic educational opportunity.<sup>2</sup> The revisionist challenge, well represented in the work of Graff and Lockridge, has given the received model of literacy essential reference to a larger system of social relations in which literacy is always embedded, and which it helps maintain. But like its normative predecessor, a power model of literacy has often been grounded in the assumption that literacy skills have absolute utility for their possessors. Students of the power model have sometimes regarded literacy as a form of skilled labor that enables its possessors to do or produce something for which they are compensated fairly or unfairly in the marketplace. Literacy may also have a political utility that, translated into collective action,

produces responsive, efficient democracy or, translated into collective submission, reproduces hegemony.

### **3. MARKER MODEL**

If who benefits from the practice of literacy is the central issue in power models of literacy, some of the newest work in literacy again takes up the problem of definition. Instead of the single criterion definition attempted by the skills model, however, this work seeks to reconstitute the literacies of particular cultural systems in their own terms. In this incarnation, how various textual practices sign, mark, and negotiate status in the worlds to which they belong is of primary interest, and determines what each cultural "literacy" consists of.<sup>3</sup> A point often made by work in this tradition is that many of these worlds have little to do with the pedagogical concerns of the presumptively universal skills model based in the history of the modern Western school, limited institution with narrow aims from the perspective of all the uses that are made and have been made of literacy in Western and non-Western cultures.

At the moment, the work best known for calling into question a monolithic literacy with monolithic effects is that of Scribner and Cole (1981) on schooled and nonschooled literacies practiced by the Vai tribespeople in Nigeria. Scribner and Cole reject as false a universal literacy "effect" that predictably transforms cognitive processes, and thus offer persuasive evidence that literate practices are always culturally specific and train their practitioners to do different cognitive and practical tasks in different settings. This work lays the ground for a semiotic model of literature pluralism, which replaces the dangerously abstract notion of a single literacy or set of cognitive tasks common to all "true" literacies. In this model, particular literate practices are seen as codes that embed or mark social relations and beliefs about the world specific to the cultural situation in which they are located. Though some of the most important of these codes are about power relations, students of this model do not assume that the literacies of the less powerful are simply deficient versions of the literacies of the more powerful, or that the only important social function of literacy is to enforce power. In any complex set of literate practices, there are multiple codes to decipher. Some of these may be highly subtle strategies for coping with, ignoring, or outwitting power, but other codes address altogether different issues.

The historical work of Michael Clanchy (1981) on the introduction of writing as a routine tool of government in eleventh- and twelfth-century England, Gerald Strauss (1978) on the efforts of Reformation clerics to inculcate salvational literacy in German peasants, Brian Stock (1983) on the rise of heretical textual communities in medieval religious and scholarly culture, and David Cressy (1980) on varieties of literate practices in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, all represent this multiliteracy perspective especially well.

### **4. GRAND THEORY MODEL**

Traditional communications history has not much interested itself in the history of literacy, though the influence of the received model has been felt in routine nods to increased literacy "rates" as a stimulating factor in the historical rise of American newspaper circulations.<sup>4</sup> This conventional explanation remains unproved, it must be added. Expectations of social benefit built into the received model also find an echo in Progressive assumptions that have guided much traditional communications history—for example, the Progressive assumption that increasing literacy helps meet the requirement of democratic societies for informed electorates.

Within the field of communications, however, a fourth major conceptualization of literacy exists that clearly bears the stamp of its origins in the received model. It belongs to the grand theorists, especially Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong, who posit distinct social consequences for four technologically defined modes or stages of media development: oral, scribal, print, and electric/electronic. Each mode is said to determine in a more or less uniform way the character of political and social organization in the societies where it is found, and even the moral spirit of the cultures it "dominates" (see Innis, 1972, 1964; McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1970). In particular, grand theorists have cast orality and literacy as opposing forces locked in combat for the possession of the soul of culture. The assumed dichotomy between orality and literacy is generally set up to show that writing is a predator that takes over, absorbs, and eliminates orality, or at least contaminates it, and sets in motion cultural homogenization and psychological alienation. This argument is at the core of the problem that is the concern of this article.

### **ORALITY AND LITERACY**

Each of these four approaches has produced valuable work in the history of literacy and has helped generate the theoretical conflict necessary to focus further research. The rest of this essay, however, is devoted to a still missing piece of the conversation, a problem in constructing the discourse of literacy with which none of these models or their followers has much come to grips. That problem is the assumption—especially widespread in the fourth model and in communications history generally—that the terms "orality" and "literacy" describe mutually exclusive events, practices, and habits of mind.

The confusion has three elements:

- (1) the assumption that there is one orality, in a research world that increasingly doubts whether there is one literacy;
- (2) the assumption that orality and literacy are related not only in mutually exclusive but polar fashion to one another—an assumption already weakened if there are many varieties of both; and
- (3) central to this article, the assumption that literacy relates only to writing.

If it is no longer appropriate to speak of one "literacy," it hardly makes sense to suppose that there is only one "orality" rather than a diversity of oral styles, practices, and effects across every variety of human association, and that literacies and oralities are intimately, if variably, bound together. Some of the confusion relates to the fact that "orality" is still an undeveloped notion in communications history, where it has not yet been inspected and pulled apart as literacy has, though it can be expected to yield the same interesting complexity, and though it is not undeveloped in some other fields.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, much hangs on conventional orality-literacy distinctions. Levi-Strauss, for example, claims that the invention of writing constitutes the great divide between "primitive" and "modern" societies (see Charbonnier, 1969: 26-27, 30). His assertion is accepted with reservation by some anthropologists interested in literacy, notably Jack Goody, who rejects other primitive-modern polarities such as Levy-Bruhl's distinction between primitive and civilized thought. Though Goody recognizes that writing in our own society "is clearly an addition, not an alternative, to oral transmission," and that "in Western cultures the relation between the written and the oral traditions must be regarded as a major problem," he yet accepts without discussion the romantic notion that oral practices in literate settings are evidence for oral "residues" in literate culture, explained as a form of "culture lag" or the

"skeuomorphism of new media."<sup>6</sup> That is, where highly developed textual practices exist, oral practices are assumed to be secondary leftovers that barely survive. If they do survive, this is not due to any social utility they may have, but to an out-of-phase cultural evolution, which will adjust itself as writing assumes its naturally dominant historical place.

In evaluating such claims, it is worth recalling Bernard Sheehan's recent discussion of early European accounts of American Indians. In order to prove either the special nobility or baseness of Indians according to the moment's need, Europeans portrayed them as people who, lacking European culture, were without any legitimate culture at all, Sheehan (1980) observes. "Oral culture" exhibits a similar default profile in the frontier of communications history theory, although the moral categories are reversed. In order to prove the special baseness of literate culture (a reaction in part to traditional renderings of it as morally elevated), oral culture has often been defined as the absence of exactly those features attributed to literate sensibility, such as individualism, skepticism, and social alienation. Upon this inviting blankness have been mapped the alleged virtuous opposites of literate frailty, which are then tendered as "characteristics" of oral culture. In the face of abundant evidence to the contrary, oral cultures are described as natural, communal, truthful, and the possession of the people as a whole. Since technology makes, in our time, a more likely candidate for corrupting the race than original sin, some portion of civilized misery is thus handily blamed on the assumed historical triumph of written practices over oral ones.

The assumption that the natural direction of history is for writing to replace speaking also gives shape to standard chronologies of the history of literacy. These are framed by landmark events linked entirely to writing, a choice of boundaries that conceals and denies the continuing historical relationship of texts and textual practices to oral practice and performance. Even the oral traditions recognized by those who regret their passing are acknowledged only as they have been valorized by descent through written literature, a handy way of ignoring the ubiquity, power, and even the beauty of contemporary oralities, altered though their practices may be. Much historical evidence, on the contrary, suggests a constant and complex interdependence and interaction between inscription and talk. If—instead of history of literacy conceived as the history of writing in splendid isolation, or as an outcome of doomed oralities—we were to focus on a history of repeated collisions and partnerships between inscription and orality in which there is no final victory, our picture of the history of literacy, and the history of communication itself, would look much different than it now does. We would be less inclined to search for the definitive vanishing point of oral culture, the scholastic task of the grand theorists, than to analyze successive interactions between inscribed and oral modes.

If social scientists have wrongly assumed that literacy is a one-mode phenomenon, historians have been doubly prey to the same illusion. This is partly a matter of accustomed forms of evidence, the overwhelming bulk of which for historians is written, despite increasing attention to artifacts, and for recent history to sound recording, film, and direct oral testimony. More serious, however, than the fallacy of assuming that the evidence one has reflects all the modes of experience there are is the faulty conceptualization of the evidence that exists. Although the same "veil of print" that mocks our efforts to reconstruct scribal culture presents even greater obstacles to attempts to recapture oral practices through written sources, an examination of recent work in the history of literacy suggests that with few exceptions, historians have ignored tantalizingly rich evidence of oral practices surrounding literacy in their own sources.

The exceptions, however, are instructive. Roger Schofield (1968: 311) is partially aware of the problem and writes as follows:

It is perhaps too easy for an historian to assume that England since the middle ages has been a literate society without pausing to enquire whether there has not also been a second culture, an oral culture, substantially unknown to history because history is derived from written records and written records are produced by literate men.

Gerald Strauss (1978: 193) is much closer to the mark:

To speak of a "widened gap between literate and oral cultures" ... as students of the social impact of printing have done, is to exaggerate. If there were two cultures, they interpenetrated so deeply and at so many points that neither could have flourished independently.

Harvey Graff laments the "tyranny of conceptual dichotomies" that has characterized the study of interpretation of literacy in which the oral-literate dichotomy is perhaps the most pervasive of all. He writes (1981 b: 313),

Despite decades of scholars who have proclaimed a decline in the pervasiveness and power of the "traditional" oral culture from the advent of moveable typographic printing onward, it remains equally possible and significant to locate the persisting power of oral modes of communication.

And Robert Pattison (1982: 24) observes

The part of nature that writing seeks to organize language is nothing but speech itself. Speech is required to make sense of writing, as it is to understand any other technological achievement .... All cultures are by definition oral cultures.

Though these historians and some others recognize the error of denying the continuing impact of the oral tradition on the history of literacy, I propose to offer to offer a somewhat more radical suggestion. If we are to take seriously a growing consensus that the so-called context of literacy is not merely a scholarly decoration in studies about it, but an essential component of it, and that "the meaning of being literate is manifest in the system of values carried by the condition of being literate and in the behaviors that are linked to that condition (Soltow and Stevens, 1981: 10), we must recognize that literacy does not merely coexist or interact with oral practices and skills. It includes them. That is, the definition of literacy consists in the written and oral practices organized around texts in a particular culture.

#### **NEW LANDMARKS IN LITERACY HISTORY: THE PARTNERSHIP OF TEXT AND TALK**

To reflect more accurately the place of orality in the history of literacy, we might begin with Eric Havelock's (1982) view that the original motive for writing Homer down sometime between 700 B.C. and 550 B.C.

grows out of the oral operation itself ... the alphabetic signs offered a supplement to the energies required for memorization .... This amounts to saying that alphabetization was originally a function of oral recitation, the two were intermingled [p. 180]



The Greek alphabet was special, Havelock claims, precisely for its efficiency in coding acoustic speech relative to contemporaneous phonetic and nonphonetic writing systems. This is hardly the disappearance of talk, or the survival of talk as "residue," but an intimate alliance between text and talk.

A similar partnership emerges in what Ernst Curtius (1953: 68-71) called the most influential development in the history of antique rhetoric, the penetration of all medieval literary genres by the complex and elaborate system of Greek judicial and political oratory once the classical culture of the Greek city-state and the Roman republic, for which it had been designed, ceased to exist. Along with a vocabulary of *topoi* for structuring orations, devices such as metonymy, simile, and onomatopoeia were all schemes and tropes from oratory, part of the armory of a classical oral technology of persuasive thinking that continued to pilot literature up through the sixteenth century in the self-consciously rhetorical art of Shakespeare, who wrote for listeners, and Spenser, who wrote for readers but in an imitation of oral forms. If this is "residue," it is certainly not the fragile, retiring gloss on literate culture we have been instructed to expect.

The early history of Christianity is partly the history of an oral reproof to a written tradition, since Jesus denied the superior authority of the written law. The medieval defense of the written gospels appealed to apostolic authority, that is, to a claim of superior truth for the written testimony of those claiming direct oral acquaintance of Christ. The irony of an appeal to oral authority as the rationalization for petrifying a written tradition derived from it is part of a continuing and complex dialectic between oral and written forms in historical development. It does not permit conclusion that one form or the other can be said to have triumphed historically.

In the modern period, Elizabeth Eisenstein has cautioned against sweeping historical generalizations that divide texts and speech. On the manner in which printing reorganized some hearing and reading publics, she wrote (1979: 129-130),

While often transposed into print, sermons and public orations thus continued to be delivered orally .... On the one hand, some "dying speeches" were fabricated for printing and never did get delivered; on the other, printed publicity enabled evangelists and demagogues to practice traditional arts outdoors before large hearing publics. A literary culture created by typography was conveyed to the ear not the eye by classroom lectures, repertory companies, and poetry readings. Beyond the age of Dickens and even that of Dylan Thomas, print continues to propel authors away from their desks and onto the podium. No simple formula will cover the changes these activities reflect.

Another important partnership between inscription and talk to which printing contributed was the decline and gradual replacement of text-based Latin as the learned language of literate communities with speech-based vernaculars, which printers regarded as a surer thing to expand the market for printed books.

Nineteenth-century Britain saw an energetic pedagogical struggle to replace the classical curriculum of secondary schools and universities with previously forbidden works of vernacular literature—Milton, Pope, Tennyson, Scott—which reformers thought were closer to the lived language of the pupils studying them, though such works frequently combined vernacular speech with the classical forms reformers sought to replace (Altick, 1957: 173-187). Of similar interest are early

twentieth-century developments that made the representation of informal, casual, spoken dialogue of ordinary people a convention of literary "realism."

In the contemporary world we would observe the tenacity of oral tradition in the courtroom with its oral oaths and procedures, spoken testimony, and oral jury deliberation. That monument to journalistic credibility—the direct quote—would appear to us in a different light.

We would also examine oral practices in schooling, since these are among the most significant and most ignored features of schooling as a cultural training ground in Western literacies.<sup>7</sup>

### **COLLISIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS: A CLOSER LOOK**

The weight of the evidence for collisions and alliances between speech and text, even as cursorily surveyed above, suggests that literacy defined or acting in isolation from orality is a neat illusion, an "outcome" that nowhere appears in the historical record. So far as it has been noticed, the interface between inscription and talk has generally been tracked as a presumptively unequal encounter in which written forms triumph over oral ones, certainly in the long run. Before we can accept the unidirectional hypothesis of dominant written influence, presented in its most exaggerated form by the grand theorists but taken for granted nonetheless by many literacy scholars, the case for alternative possibilities needs closer examination.

The grand theorists and their followers have offered a wealth of examples in which written forms seem to overwhelm or suppress oral ones. It is not my intent to deny this theme in historical events, but to offer additional evidence from recent historical work on literacy in which oral forms pilot or absorb written ones. In these instances, speech and writing may be inextricably mixed in a single function, such as legal procedures requiring both oral and textual participation, or seals, a hybrid of text and oral memory object. Examples of writing in the service of oral custom include textual practices cultivated to enhance skillful oral performance, for example, the composition of written narratives on which oral versions of medieval Chinese ballads and classical Greek plays were based (Dolezelova-Velingerova and Crump, 1971: 2, 8; Hadas, 1954: 50). Texts may promote social talk, as when newspapers echo or stimulate the oral gossip of towns and taverns, or may be disseminated by reading aloud in sermons, lectures, plays, and radio programs in which written scripts are orally delivered. Oral tests may evaluate the authenticity of written documents or certify written skills. Texts may imitate or supplement oral customs and institutions. We shall consider a few of these examples.

#### **1. PEDAGOGY AND ORTHODOXY**

Reformation accounts are particularly rich in examples of the partnership of written and oral forms. Natalie Davis (1975: 221) records the counsel of a Reformation pastor to his flock that solitary reading was no revealer of true doctrine, since "the combination of reading with listening to a trained teacher" was the preferred Protestant path of orthodoxy. An exhortatory sixteenth-century pamphlet instructing families in salvation was titled, "God Has Commanded Parents to Repeat and Explain the Sermon to Their Children and Domestic Servants in Their Home" (Strauss, 1978: 125). The Lutheran pedagogue Cyriacus Spangenberg urged parents to read stories of God's wrath to their children

every day without ceasing or letting up, for when children are habituated in this way to fear God's anger and to praise his benevolence, they will bear it in mind as long as they live [p. 154].

Reading texts aloud was considered important not only to save souls, but to maintain proper relations within the family. "Let the boys read to their parents every day an article from the catechism and also sing them a psalm or two," instructed clerical visitors to the Coburg region of Ernestine Saxony in 1626, and "on Saturday evening children should read the Sunday gospel to their parents and the whole household" (p. 131). Not only Bibles, but tracts on marriage and child rearing were intended to be read aloud to the assembled household. Contemporary woodcuts depict reading aloud as an index of proper family relations:

paterfamilias at the head of table, wife and daughters to one side, sons to the other, servants at the lower end, the whole company respectfully attentive to the patriarchal voice reading aloud from a huge tome resting before him [p. 115].

Though such domestic images were specific to Reformation discourse, they persisted for centuries. The *Western Spelling Book*, designed for use in Halifax schools early in the nineteenth century, outlined the benefits of reading to its young audience (quoted in Soltow and Stevens, 1981: 66):

1. When my father comes home in the evening from work,  
Then will I get up on his knee,  
And tell him how many fine things I have learned,  
And show him how good I can be.
2. He'll hear what a number I know how to count,  
I'll tell him what words I can spell,  
And I hope, if I learn something every day,  
That ere long I shall read very well.

A similar picture of domestic order rooted in a harmonious combination of oral and textual habits was presented in the *Athens Mirror and Literary Register* in 1828 (quoted in Soltow and Stevens, 1981: 66):

The little family circle is never so closely united and so happy in itself as winter evenings, especially when the storm is beating upon the window; and he ought to be a happy man who listens while one of his children reads, and watches his eyes sparkling when he reads of an act of magnanimity, or his lips curl in scorn at baseness and ingratitude.

Pedagogical instruction has always leaned heavily on oral practice with texts. Learned Latin, the foundation of elite European education for centuries, was taught as late as the sixteenth century by

the so-called natural method. Children listened to a sentence spoken by the teacher and repeated it aloud while looking at the written syllables in their ABC book or tracing the letters on a wax tablet or a scrap of paper [Strauss, 1978: 189].

The title of a reading textbook published in 1559 pre-sented a partnership of oral practice and textual form as *A Most Useful Book of Sounds, Illustrated with Fig-ures Giving the True Sound of Each Letter and Syllable, from Which Young Men, Husbands, and Wives and Other Adults, Can Easily Learn to Read in as Little as 24 Hours* (1978: 194). Harvey Graff (1979: 43) reports that silent reading was not valued in

Canadian common and gram-mar schools before the mid-nineteenth century, and that oral reading by teachers to pupils, accompanied by pupil recitation and repetition, dominated classroom procedures for years beyond.

The extent to which examination and evaluation pro-cedures for literacy were oral for most of the history of Western education is striking. The test for determining that a child had learned his letters in the hornbook, according to a seventeenth-century English teacher's manual, was to make him "run over all the letters in the alphabet or Christ cross row, both forwards and back-wards, until he can tell any one of them which is pointed at" (quoted in Cressy, 1980: 20-21 ). In Edmund Coote's English School Master of 1596, reading progress was indicated by "distinct reading," that is, oral spelling from memory and "the true framing of your voice" (Cressy, 1980: 20-21 ). An example of classroom practice in which pupils were encouraged to test one another reflects the significantly oral character of "writing":

John: How do you write people?

Robert: I cannot write.

Protestant reformers in sixteenth-century Germany kept detailed records of oral catechetical examinations conducted on official clerical visitations to ascertain the true penetration of faith among the people. Examinees were asked to recite and explain aloud key texts such as the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Decalogue, and various catechisms, though many examiners had to be satisfied with more modest achievements, given widespread doctrinal ignorance in the rural areas they visited (Strauss, 1978: 249-267).

Popular literacy in the nineteenth century reflects a number of enduring partnerships between oral and written forms. In the struggle to give English literature a preferred place over Latin and Greek in the educational curriculum, several parliamentary commissions were convened. Richard Altick (1957: 186) quotes the testimony of one witness who was convinced that English literature could redeem middle-class youths from boredom and vice:

The classical English writers should be read in class, sentences analyzed, synonyms distinguished, a great deal of poetry should be committed to memory, and compositions written in imitation of particular writers. All this should be closely connected with the teaching of elocution.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, liberal reformers attempted to supplement the brief school-ing of the laboring classes with mechanics; institutes, workingmen's clubs, and mutual improvement societies. While one of the goals of the reformers was to cultivate a taste for reading among laborers by having them listen to learned lecturers, many were ambivalent about the prospect of democratic reading. More reassuring to some reformers were displays of submission to an orally legitimated order. In 1825 an institute propagandist wrote (Altick, 1957: 189),

The spectacle of hundreds of individuals, who have finished the labours of the day, congregating together in a spacious apartment, listening with mute admiration to the sublime truths of philosophy, is truly worthy of a great and enlightened people.

Soon after the movement began, the audience of operatives in whose behalf it had been organized was replaced by middle-class audiences of business and professional men and their families. Whether the mechanics' institutes encouraged reading even among this group is moot. According to Altick (1957: 204),

Many Victorian men and women attended them as a painless substitute for reading ... in the pleasant excitement of a social gathering, they could acquire a smattering of literary culture sufficient at least to sustain them in polite conversation.

## 2. TEXT AS A PROMOTER OF TALK

Examples abound of literacy as a facilitator of oral discourse and social conversation, especially in a religious context. Among the upper classes we hear of the "Sunday book" and the "family reading circle," where the Bible and other uplifting works were read aloud. Among the lower classes we hear of encounters in the field and over late-night sewing. A sixteenth-century Protestant linen-weaver explained to his clerical examiners that he "was led to knowledge of the Gospel by ... my neighbour, who had a Bible printed at Lyon and who taught me the Psalms by heart" (quoted in Davis, 1975: 189). The two neighbors would be walking together in the fields on Sundays and feast days, discoursing about scripture and the abuses of priests. When vernacular Bibles first appeared in England, an eyewitness wrote,

imedyately after diveres pore men in the towne of Chelmsford ... bought the Newe Testament of Jesus Christ, and on sundays dyd set redinge in the lower ende of the church, an many wolde floke about them to heare theyr readinge [quoted in Schofield, 1968: 313].

Schofield suggests that shared reading, more than the prospects of universal literacy, as has sometimes been supposed, prompted Henry VIII to prohibit Bible reading in English either privately or aloud to others by all except noblemen and gentlemen, who alone could have the Bible read aloud in their households. The vernacular Bible could not even be read in church without specific royal or episcopal dispensation.

Alexander Somerville, a nineteenth-century political journalist risen from the ranks of the laboring classes, discovered Burns "through the talk of a fellow harvester who was given to reciting Burns's poems and telling of his life." Finding a volume of Burns's verse owned by this harvester in his son's possession, Somerville's father was alarmed and then delighted by its content.

He ... read it again and again, his grave countenance relaxing, and the muscles of his face curling into a smile, and the smile widening to a broad laugh at certain passages, which having read to himself, he would read aloud, that we might all laugh [in Altick, 1957: 247- 248].

Similarly, Davis (1975: 201) describes a traditional winter eve village gathering in the French countryside, the *veillée*:

Here tools were mended by candlelight, thread was spun, the unmarried flirted, [while the more puritanical] people sang, and some man or woman told stories-of Mesuline, that wondrous

woman-serpent with her violent husband and sons; of the girl who escaped from incest to the king's palace in a she-donkey's hide, of Renard and other adventuresome animals. Then, if one of the men were literate and owned books, he might read aloud.

From a different century, Altick (1957: 35) reports the observation of Charles Leslie, in his newspaper, the *Rehearshal*, that

the greatest part of the people do not read books; most of them cannot *read* at all, but they will gather about one that can *read*, and listen to an *Observator* or *Review* (as I have seen them in the streets).

In an 1833 address to the subscribers of the Windsor and Eton Public Library and Reading room, Sir John Herschel offered an anecdote concerning the early appearance in one small village of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the first English novel. The anecdote Herschel related had been "told" him by a highly respected inhabitant of the village:

The blacksmith of the village ... used to read it aloud in the long summer evenings, seated on his anvil, and never failed to have a large and attentive audience. It is a pretty long-winded book-but their patience was fully a match for the author's prolixity, and they fairly listened to it all. At length, when the happy turn of fortune arrived, which brings the hero and heroine together, and sets them living long and happily according to the most approved rules-the congregation were so delighted as to raise a great shout, and procuring the church keys, actually set the parish bells ringing.<sup>8</sup>

There are many earnest stories of nineteenth-century workingmen and women pursuing a thirst for knowledge by listening as one of their number read aloud to the rest in the course of the workday. Many of these stories are likely to be apocryphal, but the weight of their collective testimony is impressive. An Edinburgh book-seller's apprentice in the 1820s earned a hot roll by reading to the baker and his two sons each morning while they kneaded dough (Altick, 1957: 250). In an English mill town in the 1840s, women workers met at 5 a.m. to read Shakespeare to one another for an hour before going to work (p. 243). R. K. Webb reports that in some milliners' and tailors' shops it was common for one worker to read aloud to others who made up out of their own pockets the wages thereby lost to the reader (Webb, 1955: 33-34; Altick, 1957: 250).

### **3. OATHS AND CHARMS**

In everyday life, written texts performed a number of functions besides instrumentally informative ones. In a deeply held folk culture woven from ancient cults and traditional beliefs, alien Christian texts pressed on German peasants by Reformation clerics offered new formulas for charms, incantations, and spells. During an inspection of the county of Nassau-Wiesbaden in 1594, clerical visitors discovered that

all people hereabouts engage in these unchristian beliefs (spells). They practice them with familiar and strange words, with names, rhymes, and especially with the names of God, the holy Trinity, some special angels, the Virgin Mary, the twelve apostles and the three kings, also with

numerous saints, with the wounds of Christ and his seven last words ... with gospel verses and certain prayers. These they mumble secretly or openly, or they write them on scraps of paper and give them to be eaten or worn as amulets [in Strauss, 1978: 304].

In England, the Bible was often found in the homes of the nonliterate since oaths were sworn on it, and even its mere presence, unopened and unread, was a powerful deterrent to evil spirits and the devil himself (Cressy, 1980: 51). Some texts were considered a bulwark against impious orality. Altick (1957: 35) reports a tract published in 1700 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge to combat profanity, called *Kind Cautions against Swearing*. Word of mouth likewise warned against impious texts. Thomas Burt, labor leader and Minister of Parliament, heard talk of Shakespeare long before reading him:

Often had I heard him denounced from pulpits, often had I been warned not to read his plays, the preacher not infrequently, all unconsciously, quoting him, so completely had the great dramatist's words and phrases entered into the very texture of our language [in Altick, 1957: 256].

An interesting partnership between orality and writing reported by Cressy concerns a series of political crises in England between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, during which the crown promulgated a number of official oaths to which the entire adult male population was individually required to subscribe in order to solidify and unify public opinion while identifying and intimidating dissidents. Those taking oaths were required to swear aloud, and then to write their names or marks by way of certification. Oath-swearings were important community events, carefully organized at county and local levels. Instructions to local officials on the occasion of the oath of the Solemn League and Covenant directed the minister of the parish church to read the covenant from the pulpit,

and at the end of th is reading thereof all [were] to take it standing, lifting up their right hands bare, and then after-wards to subscribe it severally by writing their names, or their marks to which their names are to be added, in a parchment roll or book whereinto the covenant is to be inserted, purposely provided for that end and kept as a record in the parish [in Cressy, 1980: 69].

Occasions for a layman to participate in the use of marks and autographs, initiating rituals of literacy, included appearing as oral witness in a court case serving as a constable or churchwarden, appraising a neighbor's goods for probate, marrying (Lord Hardwicke's act of 1754 required the mark or signature of both bride and groom), and drawing up wills and certain business records. Michael Clanchy documents the use of medieval documents as symbolic artifacts much like the oral memory objects established long before their introduction, which memory objects they were often treated as extensions of. For some purposes, such as land conveyance, both these recording devices, oral memory objects and written documents, were interchangeable or complementary (Clanchy, 1981 ).

#### 4. TEXT AS A SUPPLEMENT TO ORAL FORMS

While techniques of composition in oral traditions have been a matter of scholarly controversy at least since Albert Lord insisted that such techniques were purely oral, both historical and anthropological evidence suggests that matters are more complex. Pupils in medieval Irish bardic schools, for example,

were required to compose "each by himself in his own Bed, the whole next Day in the Dark, till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed to writing" (in Finnegan, 1977: 19). The newspaper which is so firmly established in historical imagination as the characteristic product of the printing press also has an oral dimension that is still unexplored in journalism history. If the newspaper on its written side was the descendant of hand-written newsletters circulated by great trading firms like the Dutch East India Company to branch offices, and newsbooks, published by enterprising printers about occasions of topical interest, on its oral side it was a child of tavern and coffeehouse gossip, broadside ballads, sermons, and even town criers. One of the latter flourished in Detroit as late as 1798, appointed by the resident pastor of the Roman Catholic Church of St. Anne to make news and advertising announcements before the church door each Sunday morning. A written newspaper which began as a supplement to this performance eventually became the first regular newspaper in the city (Lee, 1978: 17).

*Publick Occurrences*, regarded as the first newspaper in the American colonies, was started by a coffeehouse keeper, Benjamin Harris, desirous of making the conversation of his clientele the most important in the Boston community. In time, other coffeehouses sponsored manuscript newsbooks for which they retained correspondents and local reporters. Journalism historians have looked at these examples exclusively as antecedents to the modern newspaper, when they perhaps should have thought of them as experimental extensions of established oral networks. Webb (1955: 33-34) reports that public houses often employed professional news readers. Many editors and publishers from this period did not expect to support themselves solely with their newspapers, which were extensions of other more important civic roles in which oral communication was foremost. Editors and publishers were also job printers, postmasters, book-sellers, innkeepers, and general storekeepers-communications roles all, organized around eighteenth-century "convivial centers," as Alfred McClung Lee once labeled the stores, taverns, churches, printshops, and other public places where people met face to face (Lee, 1978: 17).

## **CONCLUSION**

Even this brief account culled from recent histories of literacy should suggest the degree to which oral habits and practices are indivisible from literate ones. While literacy may be said to begin with the introduction of writing systems, literacy is not the same thing as writing. It is the set of cultural procedures organized around it, both textual and oral, neither of which exists in abstraction from the other, though the relationship between them may shift. We can perhaps more usefully think of literacy as the focus of a changing and complicated dialectic between talk and inscription.

Recent work on past and present literacies should encourage historians to reexamine all dichotomous claims about literacy, not least, as this paper has argued, that literacy itself is dichotomously distinct from orality. If the work of Scribner and Cole, to take one of the best-known recent studies, has forced us to recognize that literacy does not distinguish between "concrete" and "abstract" modes of thought, other dichotomies also deserve our more scrupulous historical investigation, if not our skepticism. We must dispute whether reading is solitary and talk is group, whether reading breeds silence and alienation as a central tendency, whether writing always absorbs and modifies speaking, whether orality and inscription are always estranged and practiced in socially distinct and mutually exclusive ways. It is better to acknowledge that there is an ecology of discourse that varies in its historical adjustments and proportions, and in its expression as literate practice.



Other implicit but less obviously dichotomous claims also may have to be re-thought. For example, students of literacy in different periods and cultures have consistently observed that up to a point, literacy increases with population density. This point has been separately made in very different studies by Lockridge, Cressy, Lerner, and Soltow and Stevens.<sup>9</sup> The usual explanation is that there is more to read in more densely populated areas and easier access to it, especially by way of increased schooling. Absent a precipitous distinction between inscription and talk, it may also mean that more people talk more about reading, in all the ways suggested in this paper, and this leads to its increase as well.

More, orality is not an untouched, pure, and fragile social fact. It is not available only in historical nostalgia or as a faint residue of a more integrated time. It is continually and insistently modified by inscription, and it just as insistently demands to be recognized in texts and the practices associated with them. It is a sturdy, adaptable form of social discourse which bears enormous burdens of cultural information, and works effectively with written practices. To leave out orality from the study of literacy is to leave out half the conversation, to construct a discourse where we should be attempting more faithfully to reconstruct it.

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## **NOTES**

1. While a currently fashionable use of the term "literacy" makes it synonymous with cultural competence of all kinds, the scope of the term will here be restricted to an etymologically faithful definition that anchors it to the "letter." Exactly how it is anchored is the subject of this article. For an introduction to contemporary discussions of literacy in the culturally relative terms concerned to defend the intellectual complexity and authenticity of cultures and subcultures in which textual literacy does not play the same role as in elite cultures of the industrialized West, see the chapters by Jay L. Robinson, Sarah Goddard Power, and A. L. Becker in Bailey and Fosheim (1983: 3-29, 45-51). The most current statement of an emerging historical consensus about the meaning and definition of literacy is found in Resnick (1983). For a contemporary defense of traditional high-culture literacy, see Hirsch (1983).
2. See Graff (1979), as an example of a historical study based on the power model, and Lockridge (1974). See also Graff's account of literacy models, which is somewhat different from mine (1979: 2-19). Graff (1981) also has the most comprehensive bibliography available on the subject of literacy in history.
3. One of the earliest historical studies to adopt a marker model was Resnick and Resnick (1977). The marker model also exhibits interesting parallels with new theoretical developments in social anthropology and the "political economy of signs." See Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and Baudrillard (1981).
4. While "increases in literacy" are frequently invoked as explanatory factors in the classic American newspaper history texts (Emery and Emery, 1978; Lee, 1978; Kobre, 1969; Mott, 1962), only Alfred McClung Lee deals substantively with evidence about literacy, and then only briefly (Lee, 1978: 729-730,

7 42). For a critical treatment of the literacy hypothesis as a factor in rising circulations, see Schudson (1978: 35-39).

5. Anthropologists are the guilty parties in this respect than the grand theorists and educational psychologists mentioned earlier. See especially Finnegan (1977: chap. 1-3) and Tedlock (1983). Finnegan presents persuasive evidence for the complexity and variety of oral "literature," which directly supports the argument in this article. She suggests a characterization of written literature that I, however, would expand.

Oral literature differs from our implicit model of written literature: the mode of communication to a silent reader, through the eye alone, from a definitive written text. Oral literature is more flexible and more dependent on its social context. For this reason, no discussion of oral poetry can afford to concentrate on the text alone, but must take account of the nature of the audience, the context of the performance, the personality of the poet-performer, and the details of the performance itself [1977: 29].

It is precisely such overlooked details in the study of textual materials and their social uses that lead us to assume that literacy has no oral components.

6. See Goody (1968: 14, 68). See also Goody (1977), which attacks the conceptual dichotomies of primitive-modern analysis, but substitutes in large part, though the author denies it, an orality-literacy dichotomy. Unlike Scribner and Cole, with whom he worked in Nigeria, Goody continues to maintain that literacy does transform the nature of cognitive processes.

7. This applies not only to Western literacies, of course, though these are most accessible to us. Goody (1968) contains much suggestive material about confrontations between text and speech in non-Western cultures. Kathleen Gough (1968: 144), for example, offers an especially lovely example of an inscription-talk alliance in Kerala, a feudal kingdom in Indian history, in the ceremonial practice of initiating young Brahmins into their letters by the teacher's writing the alphabet with a gold ring on the tongue of each boy.

8. This quote may be found in McKillop (1949: 323), which traces the tradition of this story through its repetitions in other nineteenth-century authors.

9. See Lockridge (1974: 44-45, 51-52, 65-67), Soltow and Stevens (1981: 22-23, 39-41, 169-171, 190, 194-195), and Lerner (1958: 59-62, 65-67). Scribner and Cole (1981: 101) found no relationship between urbanization, one component of which they defined as "size and accessibility of the town the respondent is presently living in," and literacy, but they did not test specifically for relationships between literacy and population density. They suggest, however, a number of reasons that modernization might increase the range and frequency of literacy practices (p. 258). See also Cressy (1980).

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