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Introduction to 'Writing orality'

Bernardo Ballesteros
University of Vienna, bernardo.ballesteros@univie.ac.at

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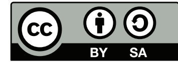
Domenico Giordani
University of Oxford, domenico.giordani@lmh.ox.ac.uk

Jordan Miller
University of Cambridge, jsm86@cam.ac.uk

James Parkhouse
jamesparkhouse1@gmail.com

Flaminia Pischedda
University of Vienna, flaminia.pischedda@univie.ac.at



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The articles collected in this themed issue present varied methodological approaches to the identification of oral traces in written texts situated widely both in space, from northern Europe to East Asia, and in time, from the eighteenth century BC to the seventeenth century AD. Several of the articles are explicitly comparative in approach, whilst others offer insights into prevalent modes of thinking about orality in different specialisms, which may be applied fruitfully to other cultures and text corpora. Working from their diverse perspectives, the contributions challenge a tenacious separation in scholarship between orality and literacy. The authors highlight that oral and literary phases of composition, transmission, and reception of literary texts were to a considerable extent intertwined in many cultures that developed largely independently of one another.

This themed issue situates itself beyond overly simplistic, rigid, and essentialist divides between orality and literacy. To various extents, a conceptual dichotomy between 'oral' and 'written' dimensions continues to permeate the research discourse about several premodern literary cultures, despite mounting evidence and growing theoretical awareness to the contrary: that these domains coexisted and interacted in many, often systematic ways becomes ever clearer. The divides that have shaped past discourse are underpinned by largely undeclared axiologies. Writing, particularly in alphabetic scripts, has often

been conceived as a superior step in an evolutionary trajectory. Its alleged distance from the fluid, recursive nature of oral utterance enabled conceptual abstraction and historico-cultural consciousness. Thus, when Walter Ong 'elaborated the distinction between speech and writing in his still oft-cited *Orality and Literacy*, the oral and the literate were sorted into distinct "cultures", the literate succeeding the oral in a relation that almost always amounted to something like progress' (Cannon and Rubery 2020: 351; cf. Harp 2018 for a recent positive appraisal of Ong). This view seems, in retrospect, a natural by-product of the fact that orality studies were initially based on observations of transitional situations. Writing was seen to emerge in contexts where it was not previously in use, and the arbiters of these histories were Western scholars whose cultural backgrounds and institutional settings afforded the written word prestige and importance. The ethnographic processes, which brought writing along with them, were supported by interpretations of past cultures. Early and Classical Greece took centre stage, if only because European culture had long traced its roots back to the Classical world. Aside from the foundational importance of the Parry–Lord theory, the influence of the Hellenist Eric Havelock on orality and cultural-memory studies has been remarkably pervasive, extending to towering figures such as Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and Jan Assmann.[1] Havelock proposed that a 'literate revolution' triggered the rise of history, science, and philosophy during the Greek 'Enlightenment'—a theory that met with severe scepticism in Graeco-Roman studies, but which continues to resonate in other fields.[2]

Cultural historians, however, have long been aware of the problems inherent in rigid distinctions. Thus Assmann, on the one hand, qualified Havelock's controversial theory that the Greek 'Enlightenment' is inextricably linked to the use of the alphabet. On the other hand, he adapted Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of 'cold' (immobile, conservative) and 'hot' (mobile, changing) societies, into which he incorporated the insights of Jan Vansina's 'Oral History'. Assmann made it clear that illiterate and literate societies can manifest aspects of both types of cultural consciousness, 'hot' and 'cold', or in Assmann's terms, 'fluid' and 'fixed', corresponding to 'communicative' and 'cultural memory' (Assmann 2011 (1992): 34–44; Vansina 1985 (1961); Lévi-Strauss 1962: 309–23; 1996 (1973): 39–42). In another noteworthy theoretical shift, Jack Goody developed his initial concept of a wide rift between the oral and the written. Discussing pre-modern societies where the oral performance of mythological poetry and epic was central but writing also available, Goody has introduced the concept of the 'lecto-oral', an important tool for conceptualizing produc-

[1] Goody and Watt (1963: 333 with n. 98); more nuanced in Goody (1987: 59–77). Ong (2012 (1982): 6, 23–24, 27–28 and *passim*). Assmann (2011 (1992): 234–76).

[2] Especially Havelock (1963, 1982, 1986). Criticism: Thomas (1992); Boyes and Steele (2019: 13–18); Friedrich (2019: 169–73); also Halverson (1992). Havelock is quoted as an authority by Cannon and Rubery (2020: 350), and his paradigm goes unchallenged (and unquoted) in Van De Mieroop (2022: 216) (a decidedly non-Hellenocentric treatment).

tive co-existence in transitional contexts: 'the arrival of a new means of communication does not replace the earlier (except in certain limited spheres): it adds to it and alters it'. Goody considers the Vedas and the Homeric epics as products 'not of oral cultures ... but of early literate ones'.[3]

It is important to be alert to the potential relevance of writing in the production of traditional performance poetry. Scholars of early China previously thought that an exclusively oral process underlay the production of the poetry in the Book of Odes (*Shi jing* 詩經), but recent manuscript discoveries have disproved this assumption (Smith and Poli 2021; Meyer and Schwartz 2022). In some cases, written instantiations of the Odes supported their orality and performance ambience as early as the fourth century BC.

Overcoming simplistic dichotomies poses challenges for literary scholars who practice Oralist theory and aesthetics to deal with the written traditions of the past. The establishment of an autonomous field for understanding and re-evaluating pre- (or para-)literate culture and thought is a legitimate aim, but attempts to extrapolate orality from its written contexts remain problematic. According to predominant interpretive approaches, orality is frequently sought beyond, and notwithstanding, the written nature of the sources, and thus comes to resemble an abstract category, a de-historicized *Idealtypus* bearing Romantic notions of purity, simplicity, and universality.[4] Folklorists and literary critics have emphasized the need to overcome such polarities, which do not adequately account for historical context and change (Finnegan 1977; Zumthor 1990 (1983); Honko 2000), but their approaches have not yet been applied more widely to pre-modern written records. Individual fields, and the approach as a whole, are likely to benefit from cross-cultural comparison and synthesis using appropriate interpretive paradigms. How are we to understand orality in contexts where we only possess written documentation?

The present themed issue takes seriously (rather than side-stepping) the fact that orality and the written word coexisted in systematic ways. It takes performance as the point of convergence between writing, sound, memory, and audience. Against this background, and promoting a full consideration of the historico-cultural and material contexts of textual production and reception, the contributions point to structures that sometimes occur in unrelated traditions, explore reasons for these parallels and differences, and detail their manifestations in each context. Taken together, the articles highlight ways in which careful cross-cultural comparison, that analyses correspondences as well as differences, constitutes a valuable means for studying oral phenomena in different cultural contexts. The

[3] Goody (2010: 149–50, 155); already Goody (1987: 78–109). In the present volume, Sanskrit and early Greek texts are respectively treated by Dokter-Mersch and Ballesteros.

[4] Recently Kahane (2022) on Homeric formulae and undifferentiated notions of tradition. Friedrich (2019) is a fierce critic of certain strands of 'Parryism' in Homeric studies. Amodio (2020) is a worthwhile collective volume that pursues oral theory but avoids essentializing and monolithic frameworks.

essays are divided into three sections, which address how the coexistence of orality and writing affects formulaic language, performance in writing cultures, and textual traditions.

Beyond oral formulae

Formulaic language has often been treated as the epitome of oral discourse, whether as a trace of pre-written traditions or as a hook for extemporizing recitation. Reassessing such interpretations, the first group of essays in the volume engage with material from historically unrelated texts in several cultures (Babylonian, Homeric, Old Norse, Middle English, and Old Chinese) to reframe the functions of formulae in diverse performative contexts. Ballesteros, Parkhouse, and Carter concentrate on the aesthetic impetuses and impacts of formulaic language in poetic texts. Their methods draw on an extensive history of Classical scholarship, opening avenues for methodological reflection, while emphasizing the processes, contexts, and audiences of performance. These articles present 'performance-directed' approaches that disrupt linear evolutionary models—often derived from the works of Parry and Lord—that propose a trajectory from the oral to the written, from the oral 'folk' performance of non-literate actors to artfully designed literary works. Instead, the authors cast the oral and the written as mutually sustaining domains of literary and performance culture.

Along with Pischedda, the three authors mentioned above shift focus onto the social and cultural practices surrounding texts. To approach performance involves a range of analytical strategies, each developed to work with the particular constraints and affordances of a given text corpus. The papers show how study may be undertaken at different scales, from collocations of specific words in different syntactic and thematic settings (Parkhouse), through constructions with varied content and adapted to distinct metrical contexts (Ballesteros), to refrains that propel the narrative through its turning points (Carter). Analysis may be carried out within a tradition or between different ones, and include such genres as lengthy narrative poems and terse records of divination rituals (Pischedda).

Performance-directed approaches highlight the methodological challenges involved in interpreting the significance of formulaic expressions. They show how formulae cannot easily be treated as straightforward markers of intra- or intertextual allusions, or—as Parkhouse observes in relation to Old Norse eddic poetry—of stemmatic relationships between texts. Rather, formulae were employed, modified, or omitted by actors seeking to produce certain aesthetic effects within the constraints of traditional formal parameters and the expectations of their audiences. Such contexts are accessible to modern scholars only through the extant texts themselves. The authors show how these challenges may be con-

fronted through close comparative study. Surveying the histories and features of two or more texts, either within a single cultural tradition or between different ones, helps to flesh out the possible scenarios that led to the use of formulae by writers and performers.

Different ways of conceptualizing the oral-written relationship are outlined by Ballesteros and Parkhouse, though both offer analyses in terms of spectra rather than fixed categories, to account for the flexibility of oral and written practices. For **Ballesteros**, the forms of formulaic naming-expressions in Homeric and Old Babylonian Akkadian poetry were meant to evoke a sense of tradition, even if the formulae themselves were not necessarily inherited. He proposes three degrees of 'traditionality': first, expressions that were fixed and widespread in content and structure, and unlikely to have been coined by the authors of the Greek and Babylonian texts at issue; secondly, ones based on recognizable traditional patterns, but with novel content slotted into those structures; and finally, expressions that seem to be non-formulaic in both content and structure. The comparison yields commensurate results for Homeric and Babylonian epic, even though illiterate composition is frequently thought to have played a major role in early Greek epic, whereas Akkadian poetry stems from the scribal culture of Old Babylonian Mesopotamia.

That awareness of deep literary and oral histories in early Greece and the Near East is complemented by **Parkhouse**'s focus on audiences' dynamic exposure to a range of eddic poems in circulation, whose repeated collocations established links between scenes across multiple texts and therefore contributed to deeper understandings of characters and their interactions. Importantly, the aesthetic effect of such connections relied on the traditional resonance of eddic verse in a world of performance, but seems to reflect a *deliberate* (as opposed to improvised) mode of composition.

Carter offers a new reading of Geoffrey Chaucer's 'repeated phrases', which he distinguishes from Homeric formulae, in the context of late 14th-century England's public reading practices. These repetitions represent a powerful literary device designed to draw the audience's attention, in line with the Middle English romance tradition of oral performance. Chaucer deliberately uses these repetitions in the narrative poem *Troilus and Criseyde* in a manner akin to song refrains, thereby blurring the boundaries between narrative and lyric poetry. Carter sheds light on Chaucer's exploration of the refrain's intrinsic paradox—suggesting closure while simultaneously being repeated—by examining the use of 'more' phrases. This dynamic interplay makes *Troilus and Criseyde* a unique combination of song and story, blending written text with oral performance.

The early Chinese divination records inscribed on bones and turtle shells discussed by **Pischedda** further exemplify a direct challenge to models based on Parry and Lord's studies. Pischedda emphasizes that the creation of written records was detached from the oral

divinatory act in most cases. Written formulae therefore serve to condense more extensive oral recitations into forms that work with dynamic ritual procedures performed on a daily basis, facilitating the 'act of writing' on such hard media as bones and shells. These scribal strategies may have furthermore aided subsequent consultation of large amounts of complex information, whose carriers were often produced and stored in large quantities.

Performing the written

A second strand of discourse, exemplified by Lindstedt and Downs, moves away from formulae but continues to explore evidence for orality in literate cultures (Medieval French, early-modern China, and Japan), and key socio-cultural forces through which performance affects the written text. Their articles study the representation of oral performance in written texts: how it is marked, what functions it serves, and what drives its conceptualization both within and between traditions. Oral dimensions of text cultures emerge as fluid and entangled bodies of practices in continual development.

Lindstedt undertakes an examination of the multi-faceted strategies with which an 'impression of orality' was constructed in medieval sermons in north-western Europe. Irrespective of whether they were actually delivered, these sermons were composed with a conscious orientation towards performance, affording a unique opportunity to observe how elements constitutive of 'fictive orality' are embedded in their textual fabric. Lindstedt first focusses on manuals on the art of preaching (*artes praedicandi*) to delineate the contours of the compositional techniques associated with 'fictive orality'. She then draws upon her ongoing editorial work on a 13th-century sermon written in Anglo-Norman French (*Compileison de dis commandemenz*) to exemplify the application of these techniques within this text. A detailed analysis of the text informs Lindstedt's exploration of the rhetorical strategies exploited by the sermon's author to engender an impression of orality. Finally, Lindstedt explores how punctuation, as transmitted in the manuscript that preserves the sermon, is conceived expressly 'for the ear', and may thus enhance our understanding of the methods employed in inscribing orality into a written composition.

Downs presents a case study from a cultural realm which is relatively underexplored in the field of orality studies, namely early-modern China and Japan. The author explores how the oral effects, as opposed to oral residues, of Ming (1368–1644) Chinese vernacular fiction are lost in the translation of Luo Guanzhong's 羅貫中 16th-century *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* into Japanese by Konan Bunzan 湖南文山 (17th-century). Downs applies Wilt Idema's model of 'the storyteller's manner' to carry out a fine-grained analysis which problematizes the tenet that features of oral performance were omitted in the Japanese rendering. In contrast to previously accepted interpretations, the application of Idema's

methodology reveals that the omission of *all* the oral effects during the translation should be questioned. Comparison in a context of cross-cultural transmission thus illuminates how performance-directed features are both resilient and productive for processes of textual transformation.

Shaping written traditions

Texts, then, may accommodate the dynamic nature of performance by incorporating features of oral discourse, but in several pre-modern cultures performance had a direct effect on the nature and history of a written work, fundamentally challenging notions of textual unity and fixity. The articles of Cross and Dokter-Mersch explore aspects of these phenomena in ancient Egyptian (Demotic) and medieval Sanskrit narratives, two contexts that once again highlight the agency of religious groups.

Cross takes the concept of *mouvance* from Paul Zumthor's studies of medieval French literature and adapts it to the study of variation between the manuscripts of a Demotic Egyptian novella, *The Prebend of Amun*. Through his analysis, Cross suggests that some texts are fundamentally unstable entities. Manuscripts of the novella were 'living libretti', whose performers modified the written text to flesh out characters and to heighten the emotional impact of scenes, the better to suit the tastes and expectations of diverse audiences. Performance, which is not illiterate improvisation, thus proves to be a powerful tool for modern observers to understand ancient textual variation.

Finally, **Dokter-Mersch** navigates the interaction of orality, performance, and writtenness in tracing the 'compositional complex' of Sanskrit literature, which includes composition, preservation, and transmission. Dokter-Mersch outlines the dominant paradigm according to which the earliest, Vedic texts made no use of writing for any of the three components of the compositional complex, whereas the great epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* may have started to do so at some point in their long compositional histories. Concentrating on the medieval Purāṇas, the article challenges interpretations that place writing at the end of a linear evolutionary trajectory. Dokter-Mersch presents new research on the paradigmatic *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, a textual complex with no critical edition to date. The manuscript tradition of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* attests to high degrees of performance-directed variation, excerption, and re-elaboration. Meanwhile, the text's own prescriptions concerning written preservation and oral delivery—both ritually regulated—reiterate that relationships between the two domains can vary widely between cultural contexts, even within larger societies. Finally, whereas the text's rhetoric shrouds the historical process of composition in mystery, its claim to derivation from divine utterance underscores the importance that cultures may ascribe to a 'long tradition of orality in a world of manuscripts'.

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