



Oral Tradition and Book Culture

Edited by

Pertti Anttonen, Cecilia af Forselles and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander

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Contents

PERTTI ANTTONEN, CECILIA AF FORSELLES & KIRSTI SALMI-NIKLANDER
Introduction: Oral Tradition and Book Culture 7

MARGARET J.M. EZELL
“But the Lord said to me, ‘Say Not guilty’”:
Recreating Courtroom Drama in Trial Accounts by 17th-Century
English Sectarian Women 19

RIKARD WINGÅRD
Argumentum as Oral Substitute and the Transformations
of *Volksbuch* Peritexts 32

CECILIA AF FORSELLES
Oral Tradition and the Press: Interaction between Periphery
and Academic Centre in 18th-Century Finland 50

YURI COWAN
Orality, Authenticity, and the Historiography of the Everyday:
The Ballad in Victorian Scholarship and Print Culture 74

KYRRE KVERNDOKK
Disciplining the Polyphony of the Herbarium:
The Order of Folklore in the Norwegian Folklore Archives 92

KIRSTI SALMI-NIKLANDER
Ideals, Practices and Debates Related to Oral Tradition
in 19th-Century Finnish Student Culture 111

DIARMUID Ó GIOLLÁIN
Books, Manuscripts and Orality: Notes on Reading, Writing
and Narrating in Irish 127


MARIJA DALBELLO
Threshold Text and the Metaphysics of Writing 146

Contributors 168

Abstract 170


Name Index 171

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Introduction: Oral Tradition and Book Culture

In many academic environments, the study of oral traditions or folklore has traditionally excluded the influence of literature and other printed media on what is observed and documented as oral tradition. Oral traditions have been considered to diffuse and circulate only orally, and anything that informants (the “folk”) have learned from printed sources has been regarded as “contamination” that would question the authenticity of the observed cultural performances as well as the collected materials. This has been evident, for example, in archival practices that have seen literary influences in archived texts as adulteration caused by careless collectors, who have added “embellishments” to that which has been faithfully recorded from “the mouth of the folk” (see e.g. Apo 2007). In the mid-20th century, the label of *fakelore* was coined to mark off anything learned from or distributed by books or other printed media as well as material composed by the informant him or herself as inauthentic (see e.g. Dorson 1950). Following Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes equates fakelore with “tailoring, fabrication, adulteration, manipulation and doctoring, and locates it in the combining of different versions and the production of composite texts, in the falsification of informant data, in the rewriting, embellishment and elaboration of oral materials, and in the imposing of literary criteria upon oral materials.” (Anttonen 2014a, 70; see also Dundes 1985, 5, 8.) Besides fakelore, the term *booklore* has been used to distinguish “bookish” traces from the culture created and transmitted orally, from folklore. In addition to materials that draw on or originate from literary and/or printed sources, booklore also denotes orally transmitted lore that concerns and deals with literary and/or printed sources.

It has also been rather common to see oral traditions as a historical layer that preceded literature, constituting its generic system in an inchoate and primitive form. In order to provide an alternative perspective to this chronological relationship, the literary scholar Susan Stewart has argued that folkloristic genres, such as the epic, fable, proverb, fairy tale and ballad, are artefacts constructed by a literary culture. As such, they are projections of authenticity onto oral forms that are “antiqued”, distressed, made old. Stewart emphasizes that “when oral forms are transformed into ‘evidence’ and ‘artefacts’, they acquire all the characteristics of fragmentation, symbolic

meaning, and literariness that are most valued by the literary culture.” (Stewart 1991, 7; cited from Anttonen 2005, 55.) Despite – or in conceptual terms, because of – its long history of existence, oral tradition, or folklore, becomes a modern construct.

Oral tradition has become conceptually modern and literary also through its accessibility. On the one hand, as pointed out by Jack Zipes with reference to the Grimm Brothers and their fairy tales, literary representations are supposed to be “as close to the oral tradition as possible while incorporating stylistic, formal and substantial thematic changes to appeal to a growing middle-class audience” (Zipes 1987, 68). On the other hand, as discussed by Valdimar Hafstein, Romantics – meaning, we may infer, Romantic scholarship and book culture – elevated “bourgeois authors (...) to the rank of original geniuses and ratified their private ownership over their works, [while] they also coined concepts like ‘folktales’ and ‘folksongs’ to refer to texts supposedly circulating among common people, which, in contrast to novels and books of poetry, were recycled, unauthored, and not owned by anyone” (Hafstein 2014, 23). Oral tradition, or folklore, was “a constitutive outside of authorship”, “nonauthored”, or “antiauthored” (*Ibid.*, 22). In the world of copyrighted book culture, oral tradition was up for grabs – mainly for the sake of nation making in the Herderian sense, but also in other ways.

Indeed, in addition to historicizing oral tradition, literary culture has quoted, represented and drawn on oral tradition since the beginning of book culture. Romantic writers in particular got inspiration from oral and traditional sources. Many used old folk songs, tales and ballads as their sources without referring to the original recorded text. When the industrial change transformed society, literary culture cultivated new ideas about national heritage and a new aim of preserving old culture was born. Writers reflected on their encounters with tradition (Gilbert 2013, 105). Researching 18th-century antiquarianism deepens our knowledge about antiquarian initiatives and their substantial role in the preservation and documentation of oral traditions. When the focus is on later times in particular, the researcher has to take into consideration the wide nationalistic drive to reclaim cultural richness and personal connections to the collected traditions (cf. *Ibid.*, 108).

Despite the traditionally rigid lines drawn between oral and literary sources, there is a long-time scholarly interest in handwritten and printed materials within the study of oral traditions. In fact, old documents of, for example, ballads, often discovered and saved for posterity by accident or coincidence, have epitomized the essence of the antiquarian sentiment in folklore study (see Abrahams 1993). There is a long history regarding the study of handwritten manuscripts, field notes and other written documents, cheap and popular prints such as tracts, almanacs, broadsheets, scrapbooks, *Volksbücher* and *bibliothèque bleue*, as well as personal diaries, as both specimens of an oral-literary culture and as sources of information on oral traditions (see e.g. Burke 2009 [1978]; Hayes 1997; Fox 2000). Since the mid-1900s, the interest in printed materials has found parallels in the interest in the study of folklore in the age of technology and mass media (e.g. Bausinger 1990 [1961]; Dégh 1994; Dundes 1989). The denotation of folklore has

been extended and expanded from “authentic” oral communication and transmission to reminiscence writing, print culture and, more recently, to the digital world on the internet and social media.

One of the key insights in the interest in printed materials within the study of oral traditions has concerned the idea of mutual interaction between literacy and orality. This interaction has been historically evident, for example, in printed materials meant to be read aloud. Moreover, folktales, popular legends, proverbs, ballads and other folksongs have moved back and forth between oral communication and various written forms of circulation. Oral traditions may also emerge from printed sources when these are read and transmitted through, for example, speech or song. Writing and printing require reading for their reception and use, and reading as a communicative act sets forth processes that often generate oral communication – and oral tradition.

Jack Goody pointed out in his classic work *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) how remarkable the interaction between oral and written culture has been for a very long time in human history and how the two-sided influence has marked our culture. Regarding folklore materials and print or book culture, a noteworthy source concentrating on the topic is by Kevin J. Hayes (1997). Recent research into post-Gutenberg manuscript media – miscellanies, separates, manuscript books and newspapers – has drawn new attention to the close connections between manuscript media and oral performance, social authorship and personal intimacy (see e.g. Love 1993; Ezell 1999; Chartier 2014, 61–63). The ethnographic-ideological orientation in the research of orality and literacy (Besnier 1995; Street 1993) has focused on hybrid oral-literate practices (“literacies”), challenging the Great Divide view on orality and literacy, theorized, among others, by Walter Ong (1982; cf. Goody 1987; Finnegan 1988).

In addition to mutual interaction, the relationship between orality and literacy has been studied and discussed as a question of representation. The line traditionally drawn at what constitutes influences from the world of print in the study of oral traditions is actually rather paradoxical, since oral traditions cannot be studied independently from the culture of writing – or the culture of reading, for that matter. Both writing and reading are fundamentally important in terms of providing access to oral traditions and the study of materials documenting oral traditions. Orality is studied through its written representations, not only when focusing on archival documents from past centuries and decades, but also when using sound recording devices. In text-centred research approaches, sound-recorded speech, regardless of whether it is classified as oral tradition or oral history, is most often analysed only after first transcribing it into text. Textual representations record and illustrate oral practices and products by employing various literary forms of language as well as literary conventions of documentation, handwriting, printing and print lay-outs. In text-centred approaches, oral tradition is accessed and preserved both as texts that serve as cultural references and as material representations of such references. Text-centred approaches can be contrasted with performance-centred

approaches in which oral tradition – or verbal art in traditional formulations – is studied in the social contexts of its embodied production and circulation (see e.g. Bauman 1986; 2004; Briggs 1988).

One aspect in the question of textual representation of orality is a qualitative one: can a written text ever stand for or embody that which has been spoken? Folklore scholarship has a long tradition, at least since the days of Herder, in lamenting over the inability of written documents to represent orality in “high fidelity”. A quite common sentiment is that something is lost in the process of documentation; a textual document of folklore does not live up to the real event from which the document was created. One might consider this as the search for authenticity (see Bendix 1997), but the difference is a fact that should direct scholarship into methodological questions in the representation of orality rather than into lamenting over the “loss of context”. As put by Richard Bauman, “The texts we are accustomed to viewing as the raw materials of oral literature are merely the thin and partial record of deeply situated human behavior” (Bauman 1986, 2). The solution is not a “full record”, as such a thing does not exist, but an analysis of the performance arenas which the text in question intertextually occupies and constructs – also across lines of oral and literary culture.

A new look into book culture

In recent years, a new interest has arisen to study and interpret the mutual interaction between oral and written culture; this especially concerns the links between oral tradition and book culture. Book culture not only means the use and dissemination of printed books but also the transmission and circulation of written texts, such as documents of oral tradition, for example, through the archive into public collections in book format. Much of folklore or oral tradition is made accessible for general reading audiences by publishing printed collections – by both scholars and collectors of folklore. Such circulation or recycling of oral traditions finds its context in both national and transnational histories of the book, printing and print circulation.

This is especially relevant in the case of the Finnish *Kalevala* epic, which is a literary rendition of oral poetry collected from illiterate Finnish-speaking singers in Eastern Finland and Russian Karelia. Ever since its publication in 1835, there have been heavy debates both in Finland and abroad concerning its authenticity (see Anttonen 2014a). Yet, regardless of its exact status as a representation of folk poetry, the *Kalevala* is an exemplary case of oral tradition in book culture: a collection of oral poetry in book format that can be reproduced, replicated, distributed and circulated in potentially unlimited number of reprints and editions. Being a book is essential to the *Kalevala*'s success both as a national epic and a representation of oral tradition.

Regarding book culture and its research, the questions that particularly interest the editors of the present volume include the following: How have printing and book publishing set terms for oral tradition scholarship transnationally and/or in given academic environments? How have the

A new interdisciplinary interest has risen to study interconnections between oral tradition and book culture. In addition to the use and dissemination of printed books, newspapers etc., book culture denotes manuscript media and the circulation of written documents of oral tradition in and through the archive, into published collections. Book culture also intertwines the process of framing and defining oral genres with literary interests and ideologies.

The present volume is highly relevant to anyone interested in oral cultures and their relationship to the culture of writing and publishing. The questions discussed include the following: How have printing and book publishing set terms for oral tradition scholarship? How have the practices of reading affected the circulation of oral traditions? Which books and publishing projects have played a key role in this and how? How have the written representations of oral traditions, as well as the roles of editors and publishers, introduced authorship to materials customarily regarded as anonymous and collective?

The editors of the anthology are Dr. Pertti Anttonen, Professor of Cultural Studies, especially Folklore Studies at the University of Eastern Finland, Dr. Cecilia af Forselles, Director of The Library of the Finnish Literature Society, and Dr. Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, University Lecturer in Folklore Studies at the University of Helsinki.



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