Ballads and Bad Quartos: Oral Tradition and the English Literary Historian

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For the historian of late-medieval and Renaissance literature, oral tradition lies provocatively athwart one of the literary canon's more problematic borders. In a fit of gothic enthusiasm ballads were admitted into literary history, but folktales, legends, folk plays, and lyric folksongs merit attention only as possible sources and analogues for literary works, rarely if ever as cultural achievements in their own right.[1] And their admission would require a substitute ("illiterature"? "oraliterature"?) for a term closely associated with written and printed letters. (I have settled for "word-art," which can have both visual, i.e. textual-read and oral/aural, i.e. uttered-heard modes, although a respected colleague has suggested that "word-craft" might be less pretentious).

Indigenous English oral traditions independent of the written word were of course massively compromised by the eruption of the popular culture of cheap printing in the course of the early modern period. There is a grim consolation in the realization that slavery, followed by the virtual exclusion of African Americans from access to literacy deep into modern times, ensured the creation and persistence of vigorous English-language traditions of oral rhetoric, narrative, and song in the United States, destined to explode into the rock, rap, and reggae that in retrospect may threaten the integrity of the literary canon more than any fairytale ever could.[2]

For the student of early English literature, oral tradition is consequently an issue only in limited segments where its residual significance is potentially one of the factors influencing the surviving form

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[1] Deservedly so, if one went by Adam Fox's *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (2000), which, written under the auspices of a distinguished school of English social history, is more interested in context and function than literary quality: its "ballads" are not those encompassed by literary history.

[2] For some tentative remarks see Pettitt 1994 (copies happily supplied by author); a classic "oral-formulaic" study of a major African American cultural tradition is Evans 1982.

of verbal artifacts.   Whatever may be the case with the Middle English romances,[3] this is extremely likely for the popular ("Child") ballads, some of which probably acquired their distinctive generic features in, and from the impact of, oral tradition.   The latter (I have asserted) is a "ballad machine" shaping material that started as something else (holy legends, minstrel tales, broadsides) into a "balladic" narrative mode.   A ballad is what in another context folklorist Max Lüthi termed the *Zielform*, the ineluctable end product, to which oral tradition molds verbal material.   The process can be likened to the wearing of cloth, or the decay of a half-timber building, revealing the structures essential to hold the artifact together.   Or to use a less pleasant image as the price of a clever wordplay, ballads result not so much from composition, or even recomposition, as decomposition: the "balladic" result of what decades or centuries of oral tradition do to, say, a journalistic broadside is analogous to the skeleton in the niche of the medieval "cadaver tombs" in English cathedrals, a reminder of the ultimate fate, the *Zielform* of the body whose *Urform* is represented by the imposing effigy above.[4]

Ballads will remain peripheral to the literary canon, but thoughts about oral tradition are contributing to the philological turmoil at its very heart, in connection with the textual instability of the plays of Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists, as manifested by the textual variation among the surviving folios and quartos.   Long considered an awkwardness that it was the task of editorial skills to overcome in reconstituting the authorial text, this instability is increasingly acknowledged as endemic to the theatre of the time, untreatable by conventional philology, and really rather interesting in its own right.   While excitement is currently greatest in connection with plays whose variations may be due to the bard's own deliberate revisions, some attention is also being devoted to the "bad" quartos, which may in some way reflect what the actors did to the text.   This inevitably included memorizing and reproducing from memory in performance, and the transmission of a part from one actor to another without the intervention of the written script cannot be ruled out. And indeed some "bad" quartos, juxtaposed with a text closer to what the author wrote,

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[3] For a sceptical overview see Duggan's review (1993) of McGillivray (1990); we await the impact on English studies of Vitz 1999.

[4] See e.g. www.churchmousewebsite.co.uk/cadavertombs/cadavertombs.htm. This paragraph reflects my own ballad researches, most recently reported in Pettitt 1997 and 2001a.   For a recent informed review of the ballad in relation to "tradition" (in several senses), see Atkinson 2002:espec. ch. 1.

display some of the features that in the case of ballads demonstrably resulted from the impact of oral tradition.[5]

But of course those of us seeking to listen to the dead can never hear what they expressed as aural word-art; we can only see it as visual word-art, in a text that in some sense is, and by some means was, a recording of performance: "The Lass of Roch Royal" as sung by Mrs. Brown of Falkland to her nephew at the piano-forte; Hamlet memorially reconstructed by disgruntled players for a printer. Before we understand what this process of re-textualization did to the verbal material, we can have no certainty that we are witnessing the results of its earlier de-textualization, what the singer sang or the actor said.[6]

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[5] The currently standard work on the "bad" quartos, Maguire 1996, applies somewhat strict criteria for discerning oral symptoms; for a more optimistic view see Pettitt 2001b. Lene B. Petersen at the University of Bristol is well advanced on postgraduate studies that include further pursuit of this line of approach.

[6] Pertinent and disturbing studies in this respect include Niles 1993 and Taylor 2001.

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