

Speakerly Women and Scribal Men

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I want to begin my discussion of oral tradition and manuscript authority by drawing attention to the term “old wives’ tale.” Since classical times writers have referred scornfully to the image of the “maundering old woman” telling stories by the fire in order to, as Boccaccio states, “scare the little ones, or divert the young ladies, or amuse the old” (54).¹ Medieval authorities such as Augustine and Macrobius used this classical and early Christian image of a devalued oral culture associated with the private world of women to shape literary aesthetics. They invoked the term “old wives’ tale” to denigrate certain tales as immoral, false, or superstitious. Consequently, medieval writers often sought to establish their literary authority in contradistinction to such tales and their tellers. Ironically, the gendering of oral and literate discursive spheres did not prevent women from being conceived of as discursive threats. Instead, medieval and early modern literature often depicts women as dangerous and subversive precisely because of their uses of speech acts as gossips, scolds, and tellers of immoral tales.² Indeed, medieval attempts to ghettoize women in the realm of a debased oral culture result in the literary conception of a

¹ Cicero and Seneca both apply the term *aniles fabulas* and its variants to superstitions, stories involving magic, and false or unfounded tales. Macrobius adopts this term in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* to distinguish between fables that flatter the ear and tales that lead to virtue. Boccaccio picks up on the passage on old wives’ tales in Macrobius in his classification of fables in *Geneologia deorum gentilium*. Sarah Disbrow (1986) offers information on the history of the term and the ways in which it was wielded by patristic writers.

² According to Disbrow, Augustine in particular defines old wives’ tales as works that do not conform to Christian doctrine. In his “In Iohannis Evangelium” Augustine identifies the foolish woman of Proverbs 9:13 as the quintessential receptacle and purveyor of such tales (67).

women's counterdiscursive sphere.³ This paradoxical construction of the speaking woman as simultaneously diminished and empowered by her forms of speech is a result of the relationship between oral and literary traditions in the Middle Ages. In this article I will outline how medieval notions of oral tradition and manuscript authority contributed to the construction of women as constituents of an oral culture.

I shall illustrate my argument by way of example. William Dunbar's *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* explicitly constructs manuscript authority as men's mastery over feminine orality. Yet the aesthetic utilized by the poet places the authority of written tradition into question. The poem, set on Midsummer's Eve, is likely to have been one of Dunbar's many occasional poems produced and orally performed at the court of James IV of Scotland in the late fifteenth century. As unrhymed, alliterative verse, the *Tretis* is the descendant of the oral-formulaic traditions familiar to both the Germanic and Celtic elements of the Scottish court. Nevertheless, the poem first surfaces in literary history as part of a 1508 Chepman and Myllar print; only later does the poem appear in manuscript form in the Maitland Folio MS (1570-82).⁴ The poem is distinctive in that it is the product of a time when orality contrasted with textuality in both manuscript and print forms. Given the history of its reception, the *Tretis*' overt engagement with oral and literate cultures makes it a particularly provocative commentary on the conceptions of manuscript authority that late medieval culture passed on to early modernity.

The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo presents an account of a male poet who happens upon three beautiful noble women, two wives and a widow, during their merrymaking on a Midsummer's Eve. The poet conceals himself in a hedge in order to overhear their elevated conversation; however, the courtly scene set up in the style of a *chanson d'aventure* by the first forty lines of the poem dissolves with the Widow's initial words, and what follows is instead a racy *chanson de mal mariée* relating the miseries of marriage and the sexual escapades of the Widow. Each woman's monologue is punctuated by a curious chorus of loud laughter and hearty drinking. The poem ends with a return to the courtly frame and with the narrator's mocking *demande d'amour*: "Of thir thre

³ My reference to oral culture as "debased" is intended to clarify the fact that women were not associated with the formal methods of composition in primary oral cultures. Women were aligned with the more informal "word of mouth" aspect of oral culture.

⁴ For information concerning the poem's history of reception, see Roth 1981.

wantoun wiffis, that I haif written heir, / Quhilk wald ye wail to your wif gif ye suld wed one" (529-30)?⁵

Dunbar's *Tretis* provides a striking example of how the literary identification of women with oral and vernacular traditions contributed to a specifically masculine conception of manuscript authority. The most obvious way in which Dunbar does this is by highlighting through genre the disparity between the voice of the eavesdropping scribe and the voices of the women. The poem's extraordinary transformation of an ideal courtly paradigm into base medieval comedy about wives struggling for sexual autonomy sets up an exaggerated example of gendered discursive modes. The effect of the moment of metamorphosis has dimensions only expected, perhaps, in fairytales. The beautiful woman, described in courtly terms by the male narrator, opens her mouth to speak and, instead of the anticipated elegant rhetoric, the audience is confronted with the cackling voice of *fabliau* womanhood, another literary incarnation of La Vieille and Chaucer's Wife of Bath. The courtly diction of the narrator is replaced by a virtuosic display of earthy invective by the women. Drawing on the strengths of the alliterative tradition, these women use, for example, 80 different words and images for "man" or "husband" (Bitterling 1984:340); needless to say, most of these are derogatory.

The women's abusive words reveal the confessional nature of their discussion. The majority of critics agree that the three speeches do not present an intellectual debate so much as variations on the parodic confession typical of the characters' infamous literary predecessors.⁶ In fact, the debate form is entirely abandoned. The women do not argue about abstractions. Instead they unanimously present the same subjective view drawn from their personal experiences. Notably, the Widow invokes pseudoreligious terminology in her demands for self-revelation. She invites the second wife to "confese. . .the treuth" (153) in order that the Widow might "exeme" her (156). By mapping the confessional mode onto the intimacies shared among a group of gossips, Dunbar generically defines

⁵ Dunbar 1932; all citations of the poem are drawn from this edition.

⁶ One notable exception is Ray Percy's (1980) reading of the poem as a *jugement*, a subgenre of the debate form where logic is subordinate to rhetorical ingenuity. The similarity between the *jugement* and flying—both are forms of verbal invective games—suggests that a reading of the poem as *jugement* does not detract from my conclusions about the influence of oral tradition on the *Tretis*.

their conversation in terms of a familiar oral ritual of self-representation.⁷ As the three women confide their private experiences of sexual frustration and desire, reveal their husbands' most private inadequacies, and detail their acts of insubordination, the audience understands that these accounts serve to divulge the characters' true natures. This familiar medieval depiction of a female gossips' alliance antipathetic to men evokes an image of a feminine counterdiscursive sphere: a place where women tell their side of the story. As an oral mode of discourse that shares in the confession's self-representational impetus, gossip constructs what Spacks terms an "oral artifact" to counter the written narratives of men (1986:15).⁸ Through the Widow's speech Dunbar represents women's discourse as opposed to written texts. It is not that the Widow is unaware of textual traditions; she is explicitly depicted as rejecting literate culture. The Widow does own a book and she makes great use of it as a beautiful accessory and, more importantly, as a prop enabling her to observe attractive men at church. In fact, the Widow sets up her truth-telling authority in opposition to the tales that might have been found in her book. In closing she asserts, "This is the legeand of my life, thought Latyne it be nane" (504). This comment, particularly with its invocation of scholarly Latin, overtly juxtaposes the stories written by men with the oral accounts the women give of themselves. However, the pseudoreligious overtones in the women's confessional accounts undermine their authority by creating an evaluative context, one that confers the authority to judge on the eavesdropper and on the audience who eavesdrops vicariously through him.

In marked contrast to the Widow's identification with orality, the narrator's concluding discussion of his authorly activities draws our attention to his association with a masculine textual realm. He points out that he used his "pen" to "report thair pastance" (526). In the *demande d'amour* he states explicitly that he has "writtin" (529) of these three wanton wives, insisting that his audience of listeners acknowledge the text behind the performance. Dunbar uses the rhetorical device of the eavesdropping narrator to invest this textual voice with authority over the "ryatus speche" (149) of the women. In her discussion of the eavesdropping narrator in late medieval German poetry, Ann Marie

⁷ My discussion of confession as self-representation is indebted to Leigh Gilmore's consideration of the matter (1994).

⁸ Spacks (1986) points out that, as an oral mode, gossip is a resource for socially subordinated groups. My own work seeks to demonstrate in terms of aesthetics exactly how orality contributes to gossip's liberative potential.

Rasmussen suggests that the trope of the eavesdropping narrator places the eavesdropper and speaking characters into a power relationship based on a hierarchy of knowledge (1995:2). Thus, the framework of the eavesdropping scribe presents the narrative text as a form of journalistic documentation. The narrator purports to be an objective reporter of “facts” about women, to have access to facts that women normally attempt to hide. As documentary textual evidence of women’s secrets and linguistic deceitfulness, the eavesdropping narrative presents itself as an attempt to stabilize meaning that is constantly linguistically obscured and destabilized by women in their regular interactions with men.

Moreover, the narrative text utilizes physical description to distinguish between the truth claims of the feminine and masculine voices. Dunbar’s poem is typical of eavesdropping narratives in that the narrator elaborates on the beauty of the women, detailing their “glorious gilt tressis” (19), the arrangement of their hair, headdresses, and cloaks, and marveling at their “quhyt, seimlie and soft” faces (28). The narrator figure, on the other hand, remains undescribed and therefore invisible. The women’s furious words are depicted as issuing from desiring and desirable female bodies whose excessive drinking and laughter further characterize them as sensual. Meanwhile, to quote Rasmussen, “the male narrator is a disembodied narrating and moralizing voice, a textualized voice that issues omnisciently from an apparently genderless text” (1996). The effectiveness of this approach is demonstrated by numerous critical responses to the poem describing the narrator as “neutral,” “impartial” and a “lucid third person.”⁹ This lack of bias attributed to a text that nevertheless manages to define textual authority as a masculine privilege over impudent feminine speech is, in my opinion, one of the more insidious achievements of such antifeminist satire.

However, while Dunbar’s satire constitutes women as oral, the satirical nature of the *Tretis* is ironically also what undermines the ultimate authority of textuality in Dunbar’s poem. John Leyerle’s (1962) discussion of Dunbar’s two poetic voices gestures toward a potential dilemma. Leyerle defines the voice Dunbar uses for allegorical poetry as “aureate” in that it emulates Lydgate’s gilded latinate diction (318). The poetic voice Dunbar uses for flyting, humor, and satire, Leyerle defines as his “eldritch” voice (320). This is the virtuosic voice of the Germanic oral-formulaic tradition still alive in the alliterative poetry and flyting competitions of late

⁹ The three terms, used by Henderson (1898), Singh (1967), and Nicolaisen (1977), respectively, are indicative of a consistent reading of the narrator as impartial that spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

medieval Scotland.¹⁰ The oral tradition Dunbar invokes through his eldritch voice aesthetically modifies the satire he presents in his *Tretis*. C. S. Lewis notes in his reading of the *Tretis* that the poem lacks the conventional corrective urge of social satire. He concludes that the poem should be considered “abusive” not satirical (1954:93). In fact, he refers to the poem as “almost a flyting” (94). Similarly, Ian Ross suggests that Dunbar’s choice of alliterative stanzaic poetry for the *Tretis* allows him the freedom to develop the poem “in the direction of sustained invective” (1981:215). This critical recognition of the abusive intention of the *Tretis* draws our attention to an ancient oral aesthetic invoked by Dunbar’s eldritch voice.

The tradition of satirical invective employed by Dunbar in the *Tretis* has its roots in primary oral societies that believed in language as a “mode of action” (Ong 1982:32). Robert Elliott’s work on the magical and ritual origins of satire demonstrates the widespread belief among early Classical, Arabic, and Celtic cultures that derisive words are weapons to be deployed in order to harm an enemy socially and physically. He argues that these preternatural associations inform later, more literary manifestations of satire as well. Certainly medieval flyting, as an offshoot of satiric invective, is a more ludic manifestation of a belief in the power of the extemporaneous poetic utterance. While participants in a late medieval flyting competition did not, arguably, believe that they could rhyme one another to death like the rats of Irish legend, they were nevertheless participating in a mode informed by oral culture. The victory in a flyting contest does not go, as one might think, to the participant whose cause is more just, but instead to the “greater master of ridicule” (Elliott 1960:73). As Downes states, in oral societies, the *argumentum ad hominem* establishes its claim to truthful narrative by virtue of its verbal prowess and its display of knowledge (1995:130). Dunbar’s *Tretis*, like so much of medieval antifeminist satire, is an *argumentum ad hominem* (or rather *ad feminam*); consequently, its use of satirical invective should alert us to the oral terms with which it establishes its authority.

Dunbar’s use of his eldritch voice explains why women’s exclusion from an emerging literary culture failed to prevent the conception of women as discursive threats. Dunbar’s text is an example of what Franz Bäumel (1984) defines as a pseudo-oral work: that is, it is a literary work that uses oral-formulaic conventions to invoke a horizon of expectations

¹⁰ Fox (1966:166) points out that the alliterative tradition that had died out in England by the fifteenth century remained influential in Scotland at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

associated with oral tradition (44). While the text seeks to denigrate women by aligning them with orality, the poet as narrator nevertheless attempts to establish his own authority in terms of oral tradition. Consequently, his use of the eldritch voice undermines his satirical objective. By assuming the power of his own invective, the author invests the objects of his satire with this same ancient authority of the derisive word. Indeed, if verbal prowess is the measure of truth-telling authority in antifeminist satire such as the *Tretis*, then the garrulous women of medieval literature are formidable foes.

I want to close by outlining some of the broader theoretical implications of my analysis. The paradoxical stance of Dunbar's poem is one not uncommon in late medieval literature. Medieval and early modern representations of women's gossip circles provide evidence not only of concern regarding feminine secrets, but also of a continual anxiety about the power of women's speech. As Spacks states, in a comment only too appropriate for Dunbar's *Tretis*: "Gossip dramatizes the possibility that the unruly tongue may master the unruly phallus by telling stories about it" (1986:137). The medieval belief in this possibility depends to some extent on the continued cultural currency of oral traditions. Since Albert Lord's (1960) well-known assertions that oral and literate cultures are mutually exclusive, scholars have been working to bridge the so-called Great Divide by demonstrating the ways in which the modes of voice and text coexisted and interacted in medieval society. Michael Clanchy and Jesse Gellrich have collectively demonstrated the persistence of oral modes in the face of rising literacy in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries; Dunbar's poem suggests that oral tradition continues to be a factor to consider in late medieval literature and, consequently, in the attitudes towards manuscript authority passed on to early modernity and print culture.

However, while Dunbar's poem demonstrates the hybridity of medieval literature and the cultural diglossia of medieval society, its content does signal shifting attitudes toward orality and textuality at the end of the Middle Ages. The *Tretis* exemplifies the way in which medieval literary representations of the battle of the sexes polarized orality and literacy in order to establish truth-telling authority. Brian Stock points out (1983:17): "Whether or not there is a real linguistic difference between the oral and the written word, a good deal of the medieval and early modern perception of cultural differences was based on the assumption that there is." To my knowledge, few critics chose to use gender as a category of analysis in the continuing scholarly attempts to map these medieval conceptions of

language.¹¹ It is my hope that this discussion of the gendering of oral and literary discursive spheres conveys the relevance of gender as a paradigm for examining both the construction of manuscript authority and the status of oral tradition in Western literary history.

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¹¹ One notable exception is Eric Jager, who draws attention to the ways in which medieval writers began to identify oral tradition with the dangerously "seductive, fallible, 'bodily'" discursive practices of pagans, heretics, and women (Jager 1993:188).

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