

Orality, Literacy, Popular Culture: An Eighteenth-Century Case Study

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Although distinctive and groundbreaking in many respects, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) is typical of eighteenth-century lexicons in its definition of "oral" as "delivered by mouth; not written" and "orally" as "by mouth; without writing." Nathan Bailey, who compiled his *Dictionarium Britannicum* in 1730 and John Ash, whose *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* was published in 1775, draw the same attention to the physical production of sound by the body, and to the opposition of the oral to the literate arts: "delivered by the mouth or voice," they assert, "not committed to writing." The clarity and confidence of these definitions suggests that there was, from the early part of the eighteenth century, an awareness of a conceptual difference between spoken and written language.¹ Indeed, Nicholas Hudson (1996) has argued that extended and conscious differentiation of this kind arises for the first time in this period, as the work of the numerous lexicographers, grammarians, and conjectural historians who began to investigate the origins of languages, alphabetic script, and the development of modern civilizations drew new attention to the oral dimension of language. Prior to this, although it was acknowledged that the oral and literate differed as modes of transmission, accounts of linguistic structure and development were constructed primarily with reference to written modes.

On the basis of this understanding, a series of narratives that seek to chart the contours of eighteenth-century attitudes towards these two communicative modes has been commonly accepted. The first posits that the work of enlightenment historians and antiquarians situates the relationship between oral and literate practices within a strongly progressivist account of the development of modern civilized society from primitive and barbarous origins. A series of related oppositions structures this account, cementing a connection between the character of a given culture and its primary mode of communication: orality and literacy, savagery and politeness, passion and reason, ignorance and knowledge, superstition and skepticism. The second narrative adds the coda that for a significant number of eighteenth-century thinkers, Jean Jacques Rousseau being the prime example, this trajectory was not one of progress but of decline, entailing the loss of an ideal state of natural genius, unfettered humanity, and pure

¹ The definitions of "oral" identified by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as current during the eighteenth century echo this attention to the physical activity of the mouth and confirm through quotations dating from 1767 and 1775 that "oral tradition" was understood as a characteristic of "ancient" and pre-literate cultures.

orality. The third, meanwhile, observes that the bias towards the present implicit within the narrative of progress also finds expression in eighteenth-century attitudes towards so-called “popular” culture. The conflation of genuinely ancient as well as comparatively late ballads and songs within the developing vogue for antiquarian salvage and publication encourages a mapping of the progression from orality to literacy onto an opposition between what were held to be “popular” and “elite” cultures within contemporary Britain. This overlaying of attitudes is dependent on the fact that the key feature of “popular culture” was held to be its anachronistic reliance upon oral tradition and oral practices. The belief that with writing comes modernity, politeness, and rationality meant that the continued dominance of the oral within this sphere of eighteenth-century society was deemed not only primitive but also inferior, the mark of ignorance, superstition, and vulgarity. In turn, this feeds and is fed by concerns regarding social disorder, education, religious enthusiasm, and the divergent cultures of rural and urban life.

A typical example of this interpretation is offered by David Vincent who argues that “in its forms and in its means of transmission popular culture was essentially illiterate and irrational, the mirror image of the culture of polite society, which now began to look with increasing fascination on the beliefs and modes of behaviour which it assumed it had left behind” (1982:22). This metaphor of the “mirror image” encapsulates the model of direct opposition—between the primitive and civilized, the oral (illiterate) and literate, popular and elite—which, in fact, underpins each of these various but interconnected narratives. It also, however, represents precisely the kind of oversimplification that has been challenged by subsequent scholarship, and it is in this context that I intend here to re-examine it.

Building on Peter Burke’s groundbreaking *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), Tim Harris (1995:18) has argued that while the “popular” label has been useful in stimulating new methodological approaches, it has also encouraged the development of a “series of dichotomies: between elite and popular; patrician and plebeian; high and low; rulers and ruled; learned and unlearned; literate and illiterate; godly and ungodly.” Under “critical examination,” however, he argues that “many of these alleged dichotomies break down.” Thus “the once common view, that popular culture was essentially oral and that a fundamental cultural fissure developed in early modern England between the literate and illiterate classes, can no longer readily be held” (18). Barry Reay (1998:55, 63) has made the same case: “Historians have not been sufficiently alert to the myriad ways in which orality suffused the world of print.” He has also questioned the validity of a “simple division between elite and popular” in relation to the literature of this period. In a similar vein the historian Adam Fox (2002:5) has developed a model of “feedback” between literacy and orality and elite and popular culture that extends throughout the early modern period and beyond. Here, he says, we find forms of society “in which the three media of speech, script, and print infused and interacted with each other in a myriad of ways There was no necessary antithesis between oral and literate forms of communication and preservation; the one did not have to destroy or undermine the other.”

Recent investigations of eighteenth-century balladry have on the whole been sensitive to this complex picture and have responded positively to the work of scholars such as Dave Harker, whose *Fakesong* (1985) stimulated much debate about what he terms the “manufacture concept of British folksong” during this period and its consequences for our understanding of the relationship between so-called “popular” and “elite” cultures. Steve Newman (2007:9-12), for

example, has sought to “revise recent critiques of the rise of Literature in the eighteenth century, particularly as it bears on the relationship of elite to popular culture,” while the careful investigations of Dianne Dugaw (1989), Ruth Perry (2006, 2008), and Nick Groom (2006), into the composition, performance, and textual appropriation of individual ballads and songs has done much to illustrate the limitations of interpretative models that rely on simple polarities.

Though reassessment of this kind has led to a new understanding of the cultural geography of the period, it has not been extended to include the evidence regarding eighteenth-century conceptions of these ideas of oral and literate, popular and elite. We have thus not thought as fully as we might about how they were viewed and represented at the time. In this respect, works such as those of Richard Dorson (1968), Stuart Piggott (1976), Rosemary Sweet (2004), and Craig Ashley Hanson (2009), which examine the rise of antiquarianism within the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are typical. They are immensely informative about the lives and work of the key antiquaries of the period, and their analysis of both the characteristic features of the antiquarian endeavor and of the immense variety of approaches adopted by different individuals has illuminated the complicated relationships between the antiquary and his evidence: between the standards of accuracy and proof to which he was committed and that were molded by the world of literacy and literature, and the often oral and “traditional” nature of the sources and “relics” that he sought to gather and investigate. They are not, however, always as attentive as they might be to the historical contingency of the conceptual framework that is invoked by the language of such statements as this one by Sweet (2004:339): “the vulgar superstitions and credulity that marked the popular customs and beliefs confirmed the superiority of the elite.” Furthermore, the sense of continuity set up by works such as those by Harker or Dorson, which trace the origins of modern folklore studies back to their roots in the eighteenth century, compounds such inattention by discouraging attempts to question the relevance of the nuanced critical vocabulary in use today—particularly the terms “oral,” “orality,” “literate,” and “literacy”—to this earlier historical period. Taking two antiquarian texts that deliberately aim to represent and discuss eighteenth-century “popular culture” and the oral practices and tradition contained within in it, I here aim to begin addressing these questions.

A Mirror Image?

The texts that form the basis of this case study are Henry Bourne’s *Antiquitates Vulgares: Antiquities of the Common People* (1725) and a revised and extended version of the same work, compiled by the cleric and antiquary John Brand, as *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777). Both works are independently significant; Sweet’s magisterial survey, *Antiquaries* (2004:335), argues that Bourne’s text is “generally credited as being the starting point for subsequent studies of popular customs” and that Brand’s “may be seen as a significant landmark in the evolution of popular customs as a distinct area of enquiry.” But their particular relationship—two versions of one text, an original study that is critiqued, expanded, and altered after fifty years of change within the field of antiquarianism and in the nation more broadly—provides an additional and important dimension. Indeed, although Brand’s work is both more extensive and sophisticated than that of his predecessor, it remains in many ways indebted to Bourne’s initial vision. Brand

went on to be elected as Secretary to the Royal Society of Antiquaries each year from 1784 until his death in 1806, and his text, which he continued to work on throughout his life, was edited and published posthumously but very successfully by Henry Ellis (Brand 1813). In this respect, his analysis in the *Observations* is representative of the discipline as it developed during the latter part of the century. And, although the same cannot accurately be said of Bourne with respect to the start of the period—his tone is too zealous, and his concern too much with the ills of the present and not with the artifacts of the past for this to be quite true—he does, nevertheless, express opinions that others shared, which were by no means unfounded or nonsensical.

In terms of content, both texts describe and comment upon “*a few of that vast Number of Ceremonies and Opinions, which are held by the Common People*” (Bourne 1725:ix) with Brand’s additions comprising further examples and contextual material, as well as new interpretations designed to “correct” Bourne. To varying degrees, both authors seek to describe contemporary “popular” practices and beliefs in relation to their historical origins, to discuss particular examples, to assess their threat to public order, and to pass judgment on their conformance with the principles of the Anglican Church. In this respect their texts can be located within a broader context of fascination with, but also hostility towards, traditional, rural, popular, and oral customs. Fears of enthusiasm and of the “mob” are widespread throughout the century, as are the residual Puritan antagonisms towards unmoderated personal behavior and vice.

During the Interregnum of 1649-60, parliamentary acts had banned the celebration of Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide (Pentecost), and a strict emphasis on the sanctity of the Sunday Sabbath replaced the celebration of Saints days and traditional festivals. Along with the closure of inns and playhouses, any pastimes held to be a threat to religious, moral, and social order, including gambling, drinking, feasting, dancing, ballad-singing, and competitive or bloodthirsty sports such as cock-fighting, were actively repressed. Although those practices were later resumed, and in some cases even embraced with renewed vigor, the vestiges of such Puritan concerns remain and indeed are repropagated in the latter half of the century by the Evangelical and Methodist movements. In Bourne and Brand, this inheritance finds its expression in the substantial attention each devotes to the behavior encouraged by public gatherings, communal activities, and supposedly licentious festivals, such as mumming, harvest celebrations, and the rituals of Christmas, Whitsun, Shrove Tuesday, and May Day.

The two texts are not, however, identical in their aims. Where Bourne’s motivation for publication is primarily a desire for reform and regulation, Brand acts largely out of antiquarian curiosity and pedantry. Bourne’s writing is an extension of his faith; he celebrates the triumph of English Protestantism over the evils of “popery” and heathenism, but laments the current state of the church: “*alas! we are fallen into Times of such Irreligion and Prejudice,*” of “*Indolence*” and “*Ignorance*” and “*false*” belief (5). His text is intended to improve and defend public morality, order, and true religion. It is dedicated to the Mayor, ten aldermen, Sheriff, and common council of the town, and is infused with a clear sense of shared responsibility and of the need for action. In Brand, writing from a position of increased Church stability, further from both the threat of Catholicism and the legacy of puritan hostility toward it, we find little of this urgency. His antiquarian interests are instead allowed free rein, and are directed both toward the “antiquities” of the common people and the “relic” that is Bourne’s extant text. The image that appears on the frontispiece of both editions of the *Observations*—a picturesque scene of a ruined church now

populated with foliage and framed by a watching cherub—captures the nature of his detached gaze. He examines, therefore, not only numerous examples beyond those offered by Bourne, but seeks also to repackage the original text in the light of new advances in antiquarian activity. “Mr Bourne” has not “done justice” to the subject, he writes: “New Lights have arisen since his Time. The English Antique has become a general and fashionable Study” (vi).

Bearing this context in mind let us, as a preliminary, consider the ways in which Bourne and Brand might be said to follow the “mirror image” model described above. Vincent qualifies his use of this metaphor in a comment on Brand. He argues that his work is grounded on “two basic assumptions”: that “the popular culture under investigation was fundamentally apart from and antecedent to that which the collectors belonged; and that its central element, the oral tradition, was in decline” (1982:23). But how far does the evidence support this claim? What about Bourne’s attitude?

It is certainly the case that both texts are organized around a separation of the cultural sphere of the authors from that which they describe. The education and social standing of each is established by their title pages: “Henry Bourne, M. A. Curate of the Parochial Chapel of All Saints in Newcastle upon Tyne” and “John Brand, A. B. Of Lincoln College, Oxford.” Both also emphasize their literacy and wide reading, setting up a contrast between the learned authors and the supposed illiteracy and poor education of the “common people” they document. This contrast echoes the distinction drawn by Bailey, Johnson, and Ash in their dictionary definitions of “literate” and the more usual eighteenth-century form “literature,” which confirm that “learning” equates in this period only to “skill in letters.” Bourne and Brand of course also produce printed works, collecting customs and beliefs maintained by oral tradition and submitting them to literary and historical analysis. In so doing they rely on textual evidence and literary authorities. Bourne looks to the venerable Bede for proof of his arguments, provides footnotes in Latin, and includes at least one long quotation from Hamlet and many from Plutarch and the Bible. Brand, whose own personal library was vast, boasts of the wide variety of historical and literary texts he has consulted: “I have gleaned Passages that seemed to throw Light upon the Subject, from a great Variety of Volumes, and those written too in several Languages” (vi).²

The elision of the historical primitive and the contemporary vulgar is also suggested by the language each author chooses for their title: “Antiquities of the Common People” and “Popular Antiquities.” Moreover, each deliberately frames his investigation of living beliefs, customs, and practices in antiquarian terms. They are represented as a set of historical artifacts, as objects fit to fill a cabinet of curiosities or a museum. Bourne describes May Day, among other examples, as “the Relick of an ancient Custom” (201), and he aims to “wipe off therefore the Dust they [popular customs] have contracted, to clear them of Superstition, and make known their End and Design” (x). In this way the beliefs and practices that the texts describe are characterized as those of a rural, impolite, and ill-educated culture, whose vulgarity represents their status as the anachronistic remains of an earlier age of barbarity. Bourne writes: “It is usual, in Country Places and Villages, where the Politeness of the Age hath made no great Conquest, to observe some particular Times with some Ceremonies that were customary in the Days of our Fore-Fathers” (115).

² The catalogue of Brand’s library lists more than 10,000 volumes (Brandiana 1807).

Within the representation of these “common people,” literate prejudice against oral modes, educated prejudice against supposed ignorance, and social prejudice against a lower class are brought together. At the heart of this attitude is a discursive framework that operates far beyond these two texts and is characterized by a hostility towards customs and beliefs that are seen to be unverifiable, irrational, and perpetuated by superstition and incredulity. In their tracing of the roots of these customs and beliefs, both authors point out the logical inconsistencies within these practices, revealing the irrationality of their continued acceptance as a primary weakness of popular culture carried through oral tradition. For example, in the case of fairies, Bourne argues that their existence is just “an old fabulous Story that has been handed down even to our Days from the Times of Heathenism” (83). May Day, similarly, is “the relick of an ancient Custom among the Heathen” that is now upheld by the “British common people” (203-04). He also associates supernatural stories specifically with rural tale-telling: “nothing is commoner in Country Places, than for a whole Family in a Winter’s Evening, to sit round the Fire, and tell Stories of Apparitions and Ghosts” (76). “Tales of haunted Houses” abound, he says: “Stories of this kind are infinite, and there are few villages which have not either had such a House in it, or near it” (41).

This attitude towards “fabulous” stories manifests itself early in the century through John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1721:205). He articulates in that work an anxiety about the potentially damaging influence of old maids and nurses—conventionally understood not only as incorrigible gossips, but also as the central figures within the oral transmission of popular nursery rhymes, folk tales, and customary proverbs—over their socially superior charges. Locke warns that “the Examples of the Servants” are “the most dangerous of all” and advises that the young should be protected from their influence (*idem*):

always whilst he is young, be sure to preserve his tender mind from all impressions and notions of spirits and goblins, or any fearful apprehensions in the dark. Thus he will be in danger from the indiscretion of servants, whose usual method is to awe children, and keep them in subjection, by telling them of raw-head and bloody-bones, and such other names as carry with them the ideas of something terrible and hurtful, which they have reason to be afraid of when alone, especially in the dark. This must be carefully prevented.

He also ascribes his own fear of the dark to the tales related to him by his nurse, and this anecdote is then repeated in *The Spectator*, when Joseph Addison discusses “legends and fables, antiquated romances, and the traditions of nurses and old women” (1715:vi, 127). Here he foregrounds their power to “bring up into our memory the stories we have heard in our childhood, and favour those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject” (*idem*). Bourne directly references both Locke and Addison when he speculates upon the likelihood of lasting damage being caused by this kind of exposure to wild tales: “I am indeed very inclinable to believe, that these legendary Stories of Nurses and old Women, are the occasion of much greater Fears, than People without them, would generally have of these Things” (87). Brand appends a quotation from Horace (*Ep.* 2.2.208-09) to his title page that testifies to the same attitude:

Somnia, terrores magicos, miracula, sagas
Nocturnos lemures, portentaque.

Thus for both authors “Dreams, magic terrors, spells of mighty power, / Witches, and ghosts who rove at midnight hour” are emblematic of the dangerous irrationality and heathen superstition at the heart of the popular culture they set out to examine.

As Vincent points out, however, there is another dimension to this fearful fascination with superstition and the oral tales that were believed to encourage and sustain it: “Throughout the eighteenth century, Catholicism remained synonymous with the popular culture of the common person, recalcitrantly immune to the edifying powers of print and depressingly prone to superstition and relic worship” (1982:42). A concatenation of this kind does manifest itself in both texts. The Catholic Church is, in Bourne’s opinion, as much to blame for superstitious beliefs as are any heathen ancestors (84): “In the benighted Ages of Popery, when Hobgoblins and Sprights were in every City and Town and Village, by every Water and in every Wood But when that Cloud was dispell’d, and the Day sprung up, those spirits which wandered in the Night of Ignorance and Error, did really vanish at the Dawn of Truth and the Light of Knowledge.” Although Brand is more cautious about tracing absolute origins, he nevertheless adopts a similar stance: the “popular Notions and vulgar Ceremonies in our Nation” found “their first Direction from the Times when Popery was an established Religion,” and were “sent over from Rome, with Bills, Indulgences, and other Baubles” (v). He casts superstitions explicitly as the “inventions of indolent Monks” who, out of boredom, devised “silly and wicked Opinions, to keep the World in Awe and Ignorance” (xi-xii). This connection to Catholicism reinforces the association of popular custom, oral practices, and oral tradition with a dark past, with incredulity, and with the absence of enlightenment reason, but does so through a specifically theological interpretation of “oral tradition.” The term is first used by Bishop Joseph Hall (1628:167) in a defense of the Anglican Church against Catholicism; where the Protestant position is one of *Sola Scriptura*, the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession ensures that oral pronouncements from within the church are directly tied to the word of God, and thus are of equal or even superior authority to the written word. By the invocation of this doctrine, therefore, various forms of incredulity and irrationality are brought into alignment: the failure of the Catholic church to interrogate its heathen influences and to understand the potential for corruption and fallibility within the mechanism of oral tradition; the naiveté of faithful believers who accept this oral authority and follow the wider practices of the Catholic Church, all of which are characterized as superstitious; and finally, the foolishness of those “common people” who, although not Catholic, nevertheless maintain and perpetuate a set of customs and beliefs that are oral, antiquated, irrational, and counter to the prevailing culture of Protestantism and print.

There is, therefore, some evidence to support the conclusion that in eighteenth-century thought popular culture and its associated oral dimension were directly opposed to, or a mirror image of, an elite culture held to be urban, polite, educated, rational, and literate. Equally, the suggestion made by Vincent that this popular culture and the oral tradition at its heart were viewed as the relics of a world that had been “left behind” (1982:22) receives some corroboration. As I have suggested, however, these interpretations are by no means beyond challenge.

Beyond Opposition and Reflection?

The first indication of a weakness within these two conclusions arises from their resistance to reconciliation. The spatial equivalence and temporal simultaneity suggested by the metaphor of reflection does not sit comfortably with the linearity and succession implicit in the model of historical progression; they suggest different conceptions both of the individual status of each sphere and of the relationship between them. Furthermore, a consideration of the structure of this mirror image metaphor reveals that although it illustrates more than one relation, none receives corroboration in the texts under examination.

One way to think about a mirror image would be to argue that it describes a relationship of exact symmetry but direct inversion: two cultures that are equal in size and shape but that are comprised of opposite materials. This clearly is not the picture that emerges from these texts. It is true that Brand's approach is subtler than that of Bourne, but neither is free from an essential bias. The culture of the "common people" is not considered in terms equal to that of the elite. Their customs and beliefs are associated with ignorance, superstition, and the primitive, and their orality is commonly depicted as simply the absence of literacy. Of course it is this negative definition that generates the concept of *Antiquitates Vulgares* in the first place, but the representation of popular beliefs and practices as the relics of an earlier stage in the development of polite society unavoidably pushes the reflection (popular culture) out of alignment with the object before the mirror (elite culture). It is not merely that the mirror is small and the reflection is diminutive, but that the reflection is held to have preceded politeness and print both in time and in the progressive stages of man's development. Thus the sense that popular culture is anachronistic, the remnant of an "antecedent" stage out of which modern culture grew, makes it impossible to understand the relation between them as one of direct opposition.

What about reflection? Should the mirror image metaphor instead be understood in terms of a tangible object exerting a genuine presence in front of the mirror and at the same time creating a weaker reflection or illusion, of no real substance or independent existence? Perhaps. The arrangement of Bourne and, to a greater extent, Brand's texts around the activities of salvage and judgment situates popular culture in the past, or as merely a surviving relic from a lost age, and thereby denies it contemporary self-governance. Similarly, the creation of a textual collection asserts the inadequacy of oral tradition as a means to transmit and preserve its customs and beliefs. In this way, one might say that both this popular culture and its central oral mode are tied to the so-called elite culture from whose perspective both men are writing, and indeed that the reflection is the weaker of the two.

But on the other hand, the evidence also suggests that Bourne and Brand do recognize the power held by the "common people" and thus that they attend to something that a mirror image model renders impossible: that the reflection can demonstrably influence the society in front of the mirror. We have seen how Bourne's text responds emphatically to the perceived threat posed by the vulgar and their customary beliefs and practices, and although it is true that this is ameliorated somewhat by Brand's edition, it is a concern of which he remains conscious. Both texts associate threats to public order with the gathering of large groups during popular festivals such as May Day and harvest, and this anxiety is then fanned by their belief in the supposed irrationality and immoderation of the "common people." This attitude is best exemplified in the

accounts each offers of the ancient practice of mumming. Bourne describes it as the “changing of Clothes between Men and Women,” followed by a procession “from one Neighbour’s House to another,” and accompanied by “dancing and singing.” He traces it back to an ancient Saturnalia festival, and wishes that it be “laid aside, as it is the Occasion of much Uncleaness and Debauchery” (142-47). Brand, meanwhile, although less concerned about sinfulness, nevertheless appends a long description of a mumming ceremony in 1377 involving one hundred and thirty citizens, and another in which Henry IV himself participated (196-98). In both the anarchic overtones are clear. The exchanging of clothes between the sexes is a conventional symbol of boundary transgression, as is the invocation of the Roman festival of Saturnalia, and in their scale, spontaneity, and composition (even the king himself parades through the streets in costume) these instances of mumming exert a demonstrable threat not only to public order but to the authority that upholds it.

From this perspective the process of inscription undertaken by our two authors appears defensive, as the extension of a literate “public” authority over a culture that threatens the prevailing order. Daniel Woolf (1988:37) identifies oral tradition as a form of “masterless history” and texts such as Bourne’s and Brand’s can be seen as attempts to gain mastery over this history, to anatomize and to explain it until, laid bare, it becomes innocuous. Thus the collection and judgment of oral practices, and oral tradition itself, within the confines of a printed text can be seen as the removal of the element of live spectacle, and hence of the possibility of threatening disorder. Once inscribed, the tradition is decontextualized and stripped of the authority that arises from performance and transmission, where the audience or participants do not simply peruse a book, but where their listening and activity embodies and perpetuates the tradition that facilitates their entertainment.

Maintaining the mirror image metaphor in the face of these considerations is thus not viable. Neither opposition nor reflection adequately captures what is at work in these texts. Where Bourne’s attitude, however, can primarily be characterized by its foregrounding of the threat posed to his Anglican faith, Brand’s revisions are more than antiquarian in their motivation. By attending to this difference, to the additional complexity of Brand’s attitude towards the culture of the “common people,” it becomes possible to see the implications of this reassessment, both for our understanding of the eighteenth century and of our own research practice.

The Popular, the People, the Public?

The distinctive feature of Brand’s work is its engagement with contemporary politics. He proclaims in his preface that (vii, ix):

Pride, which, independent of the Idea arising from the Necessity of civil Polity, has portioned out the human Genus into such a variety of different and subordinate Species, must be compelled to own, that the lowest of these derives itself from an Origin, common to it with the highest of the Kind Nothing can be foreign to our Enquiry, which concerns the smallest of the Vulgar; of those little ones, who occupy the lowest Place in the political Arrangement of human Beings.

This attention to the “Vulgar” and their “Place” within the political organization of eighteenth-century society not only augments the sense of a cultural hierarchy that has already been observed, but extends the list of characteristics that the “common people” were depicted as *not* possessing to include property and suffrage. In the context of a pressing contemporary debate about the decline in public spirit and national pride, it also signals Brand’s engagement with the question of who or what constitutes this “public” and this “nation.” By the time of his revised edition many were arguing that political change was necessary to tackle corruption and restore virtue, and the idea that the public spirit had weakened, leaving the nation under threat from foreign attack and its liberty in peril, was a central Country tenet. In addition to an increasing fear of the French, there was moreover a general consciousness of the damage that had been done by the progress of the Pretender’s army, and of a national failure to demonstrate a sufficient spirit of pride and resistance.

Luxury, as a form of idleness, selfishness, and effeminacy, was cited as a primary reason for this weakness. It was associated with a corrupt government and an excessive concern for refinement and the pursuit of wealth among the higher classes. But at the same time another manifestation of luxury was believed to lead to the crimes of the common people, the fear of whose criminality and disorder was prevalent among polite society. J. A. W. Gunn (1983:96-130) defines this alternative form—“the luxury of the poor”—as “any consumption or activity of this class not connected to their work.” Bob Harris (2002:288) describes the situation as one in which it “was widely believed that the roots of criminal behaviour and activity were idleness or an inappropriate addiction to pleasure amongst the lower orders.” This is certainly the opinion of the Parliamentary Committee on Felonies, to whose evidence Harris turns. Appointed in February of 1751, it considers the cause of crime to be the “habit of idleness, in which the lower People have been but bred from their Youth” (*idem*).

A key contribution was made to the luxury debate by the cleric, author, and moralist John Brown’s *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of our Time* (1757:93). Here, in the aftermath of the loss of Menorca to the French at the start of the Seven Years War, he asserts that it is because of an obsession with the refinement of manners, that the “Character of our boasted national Bravery” is threatened. The “spirit of Liberty,” he argues, is “struggling against the Manners and Principles,” as it once did against tyrants. It has become common, he claims, for a gentleman to pay to defend his country against the French but to refuse to fight: “it cannot be amiss to observe, that a *little* of the active *Spirit of Courage* would do well, in order to *give Play* to this boasted *Engine*, which otherwise may sink into a *dead and unactive Mass*” (18). In his view—one that brought him commercial success but little political advancement—this weakness of the public spirit is the responsibility of the elite because the vulgar are unthinking and incapable of self-determination or action (25):

[The] Manners and Principles of those who *lead*, not of those who *are led*; of those who *govern*, not of those who *are governed*; of those, in short, who *make* Laws or *execute* them, will ever determine the Strength or Weakness, and therefore the Continuance or Dissolution of a State . . . for the blind Force or Weight of an ungoverned Multitude can have no steady nor rational Effect, unless some *leading Mind* rouse it into Action, and *point* it to it’s proper *End*; without this, it is either a *brute* and random *Bolt*, or a *lifeless Ball* sleeping in the *Cannon*: It depends on some superior *Intelligence*, to give it both *Impulse* and *Direction*.

This attitude proves a useful counterpoint to that of our antiquarian author. Whereas Brown dismisses the common people as merely “lifeless” and “brute,” a “blind Force or Weight” to be directed, and does not cite their behavior as a source of luxury, Brand includes them in his estimation of the public spirit and national pride (v-vi):

The Common People, confined by daily Labour, seem to require their proper Intervals of Relaxation; perhaps it is of the highest political Utility to encourage innocent Sports and Games among them. The Revival of many of these, would, I think, be highly pertinent at this particular Season, when the general Spread of Luxury and Dissipation threaten more than at any preceding Period to extinguish the Character of our boasted national Bravery.

He claims that it would be politically astute to encourage, rather than condemn, periods of “Relaxation” involving “Sports and Games” for the “Common People.” In contrast to the deleterious effects of “Luxury and Dissipation,” it is implied that these interludes of active but simple diversion would bolster “national Bravery.”³

This proposal, unlike Brown’s, seems to afford the “Common People” a degree of humanity, influence, and responsibility, and it does not assume that their lack of property and hence “interest” (62) precludes their contribution to the state of the nation. But while he understands their value to reside in more than mere unthinking force, the scheme is deliberately limited. Its utility, Brand claims, is strictly “political” (62) and the diversions he suggests would be carefully controlled. He does not intend that all popular entertainments should be revived for this purpose, and the “innocent Sports and Games” he does put forward are isolated and disconnected from tradition and history. His role as the author of the *Observations* affords him critical distance, and as a potential savior or abolisher of long-held customs and beliefs this position is one of power. He surveys the scene of popular culture, picking those practices that seem harmless and potentially useful in rectifying the slippage towards the artifice and effeminacy of luxury, and discarding the rest.

An attitude of this kind, which favors “certain genres and contents over others” and deeming some beliefs or activities to be “authentic, genuine, trustworthy, or legitimate” while necessarily rejecting others, has been described by Susan Stewart (1991:105) and Regina Bendix (1997:48) as the “artifactualization of expressive culture.” Brand’s proposal certainly engages with this process, but it also shares an affinity with the work of other antiquaries such as Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), or later William Motherwell’s *Minstrelsy Ancient and Modern* (1827), which encouraged a revival of interest in traditional ballads and songs, yet did so through a careful process of collection, correction, and textualization—what Alfred B. Friedman (1961:9) describes as “the translation of the genre from an active life on the popular level to a ‘museum life’ on the sophisticated level.” It is within this context that James Macpherson’s Ossian poems were able to generate such controversy and interest. As the title of his first publication—*Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the highlands of Scotland and translated from the Gallic or Erse Language* (1760)—suggests, Macpherson tapped into an

³ Brand is not unique in this respect. Popular entertainments and holidays were promoted during the seventeenth century, and fears of their insurrectionary potential allayed, through the publication of James VI’s *Basilikon Doron* (1599) and its later extension and reissue under Charles I as the *Book of Sports* (1618). A similar suggestion is also made contemporaneously by Adam Smith (1776:ii, 384-85).

existing fascination with the oral culture of ancient peoples. What he also traded on, however, was the expectation encouraged by scrupulously edited, “amended,” and “purified” publications such as Percy’s *Reliques*, namely that ancient songs were not barbarous or rude in the way that might have been expected, but rather were compatible with eighteenth-century taste. The crucial factor in his success, as Fiona Stafford (1994) and Adam Potkay (1992) have so convincingly shown, was the way in which Macpherson managed to both separate Ossian from the present day on account of his antiquity, pure orality, and emotional intensity, and also to connect him to it, not only by the production of a supposedly “genuine” and “original” manuscript that satisfied the antiquarian criterion of verifiable evidence, but also through the poetic description of an invented culture that was miraculously both primitive and entirely in tune with eighteenth-century ideas of sensibility, honorable virtue, and refined manners.⁴

The practical viability of the plan to revive selected “sports and games” is borne out, to a degree, by the deliberate reinstatement after 1660 of the traditional customs and festivities banned by the Puritans, such as the singing of Christmas carols and maypole dancing, and indeed also by the vogue for traditional songs, dancing, and in Scotland bagpipes, which followed the publication of songbooks and collections such as Allan Ramsay’s *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1724-47).⁵ Brand suggests, however, an even more deliberate process of limited, artificial revival. The “Sports and Games” he recommends would be imposed from above, rather than developing from within the group, and would be carefully policed. His concern is not with aesthetic standards or with ideas of national identity, but rather with balancing the potential usefulness of a contented people against the potential for disorder inherent in communal activities and gatherings. In this respect Brand’s view of the role of “sports and games” differs in a significant respect from the festival forms examined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968:255), who describes a situation in which the value and utility of the festival mode is derived from its location “outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political activity, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.” Brand, by contrast, deliberately seeks to limit the festive element of his “Sports and Games” to only one cultural sub-group, and he intends rather to strengthen prevailing social norms—in particular the “boasted National Character”—than to facilitate even their temporary suspension.

E. P. Thompson (1991:50) has argued that during the course of the eighteenth century “the Church lost command over the “leisure” of the poor, their feasts and festivals,” and in this context these proposals would seem to be attempts to regain for the “Public Authority” of the “State” what had previously been under the control of the Church. In Brand’s work an authority and power of this kind is attributed first to the Catholic Church but also to the influence of its superstitious legacy. The “Holy Church” is described as “fabricating” and “imposing” on “her servile Devotees” a “Yoke,” and the childish rites, pageants, and ceremonies of the “Romish Calendars” are thus “Shackles” (vi-vii). Those who continue to believe in such superstitions are similarly captive. Brand remarks, for example, in reference to an essay on popular customs by Addison in *The Spectator*, that “No Bondage seems so dreadful as that of Superstition: It hath

⁴ For further details of the Ossian debate, see Gaskill and Stafford 1998 and Moore 2003.

⁵ The first *Tea-Table Miscellany* comprised 185 pages and was published in 1724, but by 1794 it had been expanded to 430 pages and had reached its nineteenth edition.

ever imposed the most abject kind of Slavery” (96).⁶

However, as John Mullan and Christopher Reid (2000:13) have pointed out, the relationship between the state, the Anglican Church, its clergy, and the “common” parishioners is in fact more complex. On the one hand, clergymen stood for a church that places its faith in the biblical text, and as respected members of a community and official representatives of a confessional state they possess “Public Authority.” Yet on the other hand, and this was particularly true in smaller or more rural communities, “they were also viewed as the custodians of local memory and traditions which still centered on the parish church, a role expressed in their participation in calendar customs and communal festivities” (*idem*). This ambiguous role is significant in itself, testifying as it does to the way in which these individuals bridge the supposed divide between oral and literate as well as between popular and elite cultures. However, it also echoes the wider problem of definition brought into focus by the different attitudes of Brown and Brand: if it is difficult to fully separate these clerical figures from the popular culture of their parishioners, so too is it problematic to identify the point at which their supposed “Public Authority” intersects with the idea of the “people.”

Kathleen Wilson (1995:19) describes both what was at stake in these labels (“popular,” “people,” “public”) and the way that they were manipulated between 1715 and 1785: “Since it was the (largely mythical) role of the people in the constitution that in [the minds of] most contemporaries” distinguished English liberty from Continental absolutism, populist beliefs and discourses were a crucial plank in the construction of national identities and consciousness. But “the people,” as a phrase, was also used to “delimit the political nation . . . consisting of those deemed respectable or well-affected enough to be included in its boundaries” and excluding others. The “common people” who form the subject of Bourne and Brand’s studies would seem at first glance to represent precisely one of these excluded groups. Brand’s proposal to foster “public spirit” through the cultivation of their “innocent Sports and Games,” however, seems to suggest the opposite. Neither conclusion, I argue, is entirely accurate. Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) captures the inherent ambiguity in the word “people,” revealing a tension in the first of its multiple definitions—“A nation; those who compose a community”—which is then compounded by further contradictions: “the vulgar,” “persons of a particular class,” “men, or persons in general.”⁷ In fact, therefore, it is Brand’s equivocation over these “people” as members of the “public” and the “political nation” that should hold our attention.

His attitude towards the “intervals of Relaxation” required by the “common people” is inflected by a concern also present in Bourne regarding idleness. But where a legacy of Puritanism is clearly apparent in Bourne’s concern for the space this idleness might open up for sin and immorality, Brand’s more utilitarian perspective suggests an additional interest in efficiency. In respect of this, E. P. Thompson’s argument (1991:51) that “in rural society where small farming and the cottage economy persisted . . . the organization of work was so varied and irregular” makes it false to draw a sharp distinction between “work” and “leisure,” and needs to

⁶ He is referring to *The Spectator*, No. 7, 8th March 1711 (Addison 1715:i, 40.)

⁷ A range of meanings is also suggested by the *OED*, including “the general public” and “the people,” but the sense of the popular as plebeian or of low birth, which is clearly indicated by Johnson’s reference to “the vulgar,” is represented as not in use after 1691, a conclusion I would dispute.

be balanced against that of Robert Malcolmson (1973:89-90): “genteel attitudes towards many aspects of popular culture had become increasingly unsympathetic since at least the last quarter of the eighteenth century.” The reason for this change of opinion was a “concern for effective labour discipline” and a consequent aversion to practices seen as wasteful and self-indulgent.

Beyond Bourne’s and Brand’s observations that popular beliefs and customs fill the rare moments when the common people are not working with foolish practices based on erroneous superstition, practices that are hence literally a waste of time and effort, the idea of labor in the debates surrounding luxury and the public spirit characterizes popular culture and oral tradition as inefficient and wasteful. Customary practices serve no rational function and dissipate vital energy, while the transmission of accumulated knowledge, history, stories, or practices, orally from person to person and down the generations, is understood to be flawed because it cannot meet literate standards of control and stability, because it is fluid, involves inevitable loss, and depends on the activity of fallible individuals. Much of the degradation that Brand and other antiquarians report is held to be the consequence of mishearing as well as misunderstanding, and the connection that Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1728:ii, 856) draws between popular customs and error, and even corruption, was common: “Popular errors” are “such as people who imbibe from one another, by custom, education, and tradition.”

Within this context, the “intervals of Relaxation” described by Brand take on an uncertain status. He offers contradictory opinions about the weakness and/or strength of oral tradition. His preface begins with the statement that: “Tradition has in no Instance so clearly evinced her Faithfulness, as in the transmitting of vulgar Rites and popular Opinions.” Yet he compares its customs to remnants of statuary, “mutilated . . . Things, composed of such flimsy Materials as the Fancies of a Multitude, [which] do not seem calculated for a long Duration” (iii). And even here, in his second statement, these “Fancies,” depicted as inconsequential, merely the froth of vulgar superstition, are judged in material terms (as remnants of statuary) that are more in accordance with the supposed solidity and durability of written records than the vagaries of oral tradition, carried on the breath of the common people. One explanation for this inconsistency would simply be to say that it is an example of an elitist literate authority exerting itself over an inferior cultural sphere. When we observe, though, that the same pattern emerges with regard to his proposal to revive “innocent Sports and Games” for the benefit of “national Bravery,” it is clear that there is more at stake.

Brand’s distinction between “daily Labour” and “Relaxation” separates the common people from the landed classes, for whom life would not have been punctuated by this cycle, and indicates a degree of respect for their genuine toil and an acknowledgment of its necessity and value for the nation. The characterization of their “Relaxation” (especially when it is self-directed and of organic development) as inefficient and idle subjects leisure to the criteria of labor. The application of these standards of efficiency and productivity to labor and relaxation, more commonly understood in this period as either the absence or the cessation of work, brings into alignment the “common people” who do labor and the elite who conspicuously do not under a common expectation. Thus Brown criticizes those who govern for their laziness, effeminacy, and luxury, and essays a version of the same complaint against the common people. In this way concerns regarding efficiency and wastefulness, as well as labor and leisure, are brought to bear upon one another in such a way as to cut across the division between popular and elite. If the

labor and leisure of the common people are governed by the same standards as those for the elite, and have the potential to influence the “spirit” and “pride” of the nation as a whole, it becomes possible to reconcile the contradiction in the term “people” and incorporate the “vulgar” within the realm of the “public.”

A New Perspective

Rather than opposition and reflection, Brand’s attitude is built on an awareness of the interpenetration of these cultures, and of a relationship between them that is predicated on more than a narrative of historical progress or of social hierarchy. The potential reciprocity he imagines, and his gestures towards a democratic notion of “the people,” are substantial departures from the work of his predecessor and from the narratives with which we began. But although it is now clear that the mirror image metaphor fails to capture the complex representation that these so-called “oral,” “literate,” “popular,” and “elite” cultures receive within the works of Bourne and Brand, the evidence in fact points to more than a weakness of figuration. The tensions and ambiguities that pervade Brand’s attempts to consider the place of the vulgar and their oral popular culture within the body politic do indicate an uncertainty within his position; however, they also reveal the bluntness of such labels as critical tools. It is significant that he does not dismiss the “common people” out of hand and that he is able to move beyond an antiquarian perspective in his critique of their beliefs and customs; it is perhaps more significant, though, that he does so in an entirely localized context.

A network of associations, habitual connections, and prejudices surrounding the social hierarchy, oral tradition, superstition, education, and historical progress structures the texts that we have examined. They are embedded within changing discourses of religion and nationhood, and reflect shifts in attitude towards the land brought about by continued enclosures, urbanization, and rural depopulation.⁸ As a consequence, it is problematic to disentangle individual strands from the wider complex or to transplant the attitudes and ideas embedded within this context to another. Brand’s attention is not directed towards “orality,” “literacy,” or “popularity” in general or in the abstract, but rather towards the customs and beliefs of a particular group within England at a precise moment in history. While it is entirely possible from the perspective of twenty-first century scholarship to conceive, for example, of an oral thread linking various eighteenth-century practices—polite conversation and bardic song, or the emotive preaching of Wesley and the ideals of secular oratory drawn from Aristotle and Cicero—this is precisely what does not occur to men like Bourne and Brand. “Orality” is not even a term that dictionaries from this period include, and “literate,” as John Ash (1775) notes, is “not much used.”

⁸ Roger D. Abrahams’ (1993) analysis of the influence of such changes in land use upon the symbolic role of the peasantry, who, he argues, come to be nostalgically reimagined as “the folk,” is particularly instructive. The connections he draws between eighteenth-century England and the slave cultures of the American South (1992:54-82) provide further evidence of the significance of attitudes engendered by changes of this kind within the broader context of folklore studies.

Thus this case study demonstrates that narratives that seek to chart eighteenth-century attitudes towards abstract concepts such as the oral and the literate, or the popular and the public, are both limited and limiting. To propose their banishment is clearly impractical, and indeed it is likely that writing and thinking without any recourse to them would prove equally unhelpful. But the example of Bourne and Brand nevertheless illustrates the need for a new attentiveness to the heritage of our critical vocabulary and a willingness to interrogate its assumptions. Attempting to examine the way in which the relationship between orality, literacy, and popular culture was understood and represented in the eighteenth century is to impose on the source material terms that are inappropriate and expectations that are unsuitable. To continue to do so, then, when the alternative could prove more productive, is to run the risk of encouraging connections where there may have been none and of missing valuable material by looking in the wrong place.

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