



# Orality and Literacy

## Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2001. Orality and Literacy. In *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. T. O. Sloane, 532–538. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

## Published Version

10.1093/acref/9780195125955.001.0001

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:15550089>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

# Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## Gregory Nagy, “Orality and Literacy.” *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (ed. T. O. Sloane; Oxford 2001) 532–538.

[Published 2001 in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. T. O. Sloane, 532–538; Oxford. In this online version, the original page-numbers of the printed version are indicated within braces (“{” and “}”). For example, “{532|533}” indicates where p. 532 of the printed version ends and p. 533 begins.]

The concept of orality stems from ethnographic descriptions of oral poetry in particular and of oral traditions in general. A foundational work is *The Singer of Tales*, by Albert B. Lord (1960; posthumous new ed. 2000, with new introduction by Mitchell and Nagy). This book documents the pioneering research of Milman Parry on oral traditions in the former Yugoslavia, 1933-35 (collected papers, Parry 1971). Parry died in 1935, at the beginning of his academic career, before he could publish the results of his research on living oral traditions. His publications are limited almost entirely to his earlier research, which was based on the textual evidence of Homeric poetry. Parry was a professor of ancient Greek, seeking new answers to the so-called “Homeric Question,” which centered on the historical circumstances that led to the composition of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Basically, the “question” came down to this: were the Homeric poems composed with or without the aid of writing? Parry’s project, the comparing of Homeric poetry with the living oral traditions of South Slavic heroic poetry, led him to conclude that the Homeric texts were indeed the products of oral composition. Parry’s research was continued after his death by his student, Albert Lord, who conducted his own fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia (especially 1950-51). Lord’s *Singer of Tales* represents the legacy of their combined efforts.

The cumulative work of Parry and Lord is generally considered to be the single most successful solution to the “Homeric Question,” though the debate among Classicists continues concerning the historical contingencies of Homeric composition. The ultimate success of Parry and Lord, however, can best be measured by tracking the applicability {532|533} of their methods to a wide range of literatures and pre-literatures beyond the original focus on ancient Greek literature.

In the case of pre-literatures, Lord’s *Singer of Tales* has become a foundational work for the ethnographic study of oral traditions in all their many varieties, and the range of living oral traditions is world-wide: Scottish ballads, folk-preaching in the American South, Xhosa praise poetry, and the list can be extended to hundreds of other examples (bibliography in Foley 1985; the journal *Oral Tradition*, edited by John M. Foley since 1986, gives an idea of the vast range: see the representative entries in the Bibliography below).

In the case of literatures, the application of the Parry-Lord method to ancient Greek traditions was extended by Lord to medieval traditions in Old English and Old French, and it

has been further extended by other scholars to Old Norse, Middle English, Middle High German, Irish, Welsh, and other medieval European traditions. Even further, the Parry-Lord method has been applied to a vast variety of non-European literatures, including classical Arabic and Persian, Indic, and Chinese traditions (again, see the representative entries in the Bibliography below).

In effect, then, the methodology of Parry and Lord has transcended the “Homeric Question.” Their work has led to an essential idea that goes far beyond the historical context of Homeric poetry or of any other tradition. That idea, as formulated by Parry and Lord, is that oral traditions formed the basis of literary traditions.

This is not to say that such thinking was without precedent. In fact, it did evolve ultimately from debate among Classicists focusing on the “Homeric Question.” Prototypical versions of the idea can be found in the Homeric theorizing of François Hédelin, Abbé d’Aubignac (already as of 1664; posthumous publication 1715), Thomas Blackwell (1735), Giambattista Vico (1744), and Robert Wood (private publication 1767; posthumous edition 1769). The evolving idea reached a decisive phase in the work of two of history’s most influential editors of Homer, Jean Baptiste Gaspard d’Ansse de Villoison (*Prolegomena* to his edition of the codex “Venetus A” of the *Iliad*, 1788) and Friedrich August Wolf (*Prolegomena*, 1795, to his editions of the *Iliad*, 1804, and *Odyssey*, 1807). Both of these Classicists posited a prehistory of oral poetry in the evolution of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The notion of such a preliterate phase in the history of ancient Greek epic is also at work in the 1802 *Iliad* commentary of another major figure in the Classics, Christian Gottlob Heyne. The impact of such notions encouraged a romantic view of oral poetry, as exemplified most prominently by Johann Gottfried Herder, who compared the preliterate phases of Homeric poetry with Germanic folk traditions (*Homer, ein Günstling der Zeit*, 1795). Romantic views of oral poetry led to the creation of literary folkloristic syntheses like Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* (1849; first ed. 1835), based on genuine Finnish oral traditions. The romantic literary appropriation of oral traditions could easily lead to abuses: some such literary productions were of dubious ethnographic value, as in the case of James Macpherson’s re-creations of Scottish highlands folklore in *The Complete Works of Ossian* (1765).

Given all these precedents, we may well ask: why, then, is it Parry and Lord who are primarily credited with the definitive formulation of the general idea that oral traditions formed the basis of literary traditions? The answer is straightforward: Parry and Lord were the first to perfect a systematic way of comparing the internal evidence of living oral traditions, as observed in their “fieldwork,” with the internal evidence of literary traditions. It is primarily their methodology that we see reflected in the ongoing academic usage of such terms as orality and oral theory. (On the pitfalls of using the term oral theory, see Nagy 1996.19-20).

The systematic comparatism of Parry and Lord required rigorous empiricism in analyzing the internal evidence of the living oral traditions - in their case, the South Slavic evidence - which was to be compared with the textual evidence of Homer. To be sure, there have also been other models of internal analysis: an outstanding example is the ethnographic research of Matija Murko on the epics of South Slavic Muslim peoples in the regions of Bosnia and Hercegovina (1913; see especially Lord 1960.280-281n1). Another distinguished forerunner was Wilhelm Radloff, who investigated the Kara Kirghiz oral {533|534} poetic traditions of Central Asia (1887; see Lord 1960.281n4). Such projects, however, were primarily descriptive, not comparative. In the case of Central Asian epics, for example, the systematic application of comparative methodology, as evident in the work of Karl Reichl (2000), is founded directly on the work of Parry and Lord.

What primarily distinguishes Parry and Lord from their predecessors, then, is their development of a systematic comparative approach to the study of oral traditions. The point of departure for their comparative work, which happened to be primarily the Muslim epic traditions of the former Yugoslavia, gave them an opportunity to test the living interactions of oral and literary traditions. They observed that the prestige of writing as a technology, and of the culture of literacy that it fostered, tended to destabilize the culture of oral traditions - in the historical context that they were studying. What they observed, however, was strictly a point of comparison with other possible test cases, not some kind of universalizing formulation (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiii; *pace* Finnegan 1976). For example, Lord himself makes it clear in his later work that there exist many cultures where literary traditions do not cause the destabilization of oral traditions and can even coexist with them (Lord 1991; see also especially Lord 1986b). In general, the textualization or *Verschriftung* of any given oral tradition needs to be distinguished from *Verschriftlichung* - that is, from the evolution of any given culture of literacy, any given *Schriftlichkeit* (Oesterreicher 1993).

For Parry and Lord, the opposition of literacy and orality - of *Schriftlichkeit* and *Mündlichkeit* - is a cultural variable, not a universal. Moreover, their fieldwork experiments led them to think of literacy and orality as cognitive variables as well (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiv).

Moreover, just as orality defies universalization, so also does literacy. The mechanics and even the concepts of reading and writing vary from culture to culture (Nagy 1998; cf. Svenbro 1993). A striking case in point is the cultural variability of such phenomena as *scriptio continua* and “silent reading” (Nagy 2000, Gavrilov 1997).

For Parry and Lord, the histories of literary and oral traditions, of literatures and pre-literatures, were interrelated. To underline his observation that the mechanics and esthetics of oral and literary traditions are historically linked, Lord would even speak of “oral literature” (see Lord 1995, especially chapter 8). Further, Lord developed the comparative study of oral and literary traditions into a new branch of Comparative Literature (Guillén 1993.173-179). It is

no accident that Lord's *Singer of Tales* was originally published in a Comparative Literature monograph series, and that the author of the Preface of 1960 was Harry Levin, who at the time figured as the *doyen* of the new field of Comparative Literature - and who had actually taken part in Lord's thesis defense (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xvii).

Despite this stance of Parry and Lord, it has been claimed - many times and in many ways - that the Parry-Lord "theory" is founded on a hard-and-fast distinction between orality and literacy. These claims stem from unfamiliarity with the ethnographic dimension of Parry's and Lord's work, and, more generally, from ignorance about the observable mechanics and aesthetics of oral traditions. Such unfamiliarity fuels prejudices, as reflected in the criticism directed at Lord for even attempting to undertake a comparison of South Slavic oral traditions with the literary traditions represented by the high cultures of the Classical and medieval civilizations of Western Europe. The implicit presupposition, that oral traditions are inferior to the esthetic standards of Western literature, is tied to romanticized notions about distinctions between literacy and orality (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiv):

Much of this kind of criticism, as Lord documents in his later books [1991 and 1995], has been shaped also by an overall ignorance of the historical facts concerning literacy and its cultural implications in the Balkans. Besides this additional obstacle, there is yet another closely related one: many Western scholars romanticize literacy itself as if it were some kind of uniform and even universal phenomenon - exempt from the historical contingencies of cultural and even cognitive variations. Such romanticism, combined with an ignorance of the ideological implications of literacy in the South Slavic world, have led to a variety of deadly prejudices against any and all kinds of oral traditions. In some cases, these prejudices have gone hand in hand with a resolute {534|535} blindness to the potential ideological agenda of literacy in its historical contexts.

Thus the danger of romanticism is two-sided: much as some humanists of the nineteenth century romanticized oral tradition as if it were some kind of universal phenomenon in and of itself, humanists today may be tempted to romanticize literacy as the key to "literature," often equated with "high" culture (on empirical approaches to distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, as occasionally formalized in distinctions between oral and written traditions, see Bausinger 1980).

And yet, the only universal distinction between oral and literary traditions is the historical anteriority of the first to the second. Beyond this obvious observation, it is pointless to insist on any universalizing definitions for the "oral" of "oral tradition." "Oral tradition" and "oral poetry" are terms that depend on the concepts of "written tradition" and "written poetry." In cultures that do not depend on the technology of writing, the concept of orality is meaningless (Lord 1995.105n26). From the standpoint of comparative ethnography, "Written is

not something that is not oral; rather it is something in addition to being oral, and that additional something varies from society to society” (Nagy 1990.8). The absence of this technology has nothing to do with whether there can or cannot be poetics or rhetoric. Poetics and rhetoric exist without writing.

A common misconception about oral traditions is that they are marked by a lack of organization, cohesiveness, unity. The problem here, again, is a general unfamiliarity with the ethnographic evidence from living oral traditions, which can be used to document a wide variety of poetics and rhetoric (see especially Lord 1995). The verbal art or *Kunstsprache* of oral traditions can reach levels of virtuosity that are indirectly or sometimes even directly comparable to what is admired in the classics of script and print cultures. In some cultural contexts, the *Kunstsprache* of oral traditions can be even more precise than that of counterparts in literary traditions, because the genres of oral poetics and rhetoric tend to be more regularly observed (Smith 1974, Ben Amos 1976, Slatkin 1987). In the history of literature, genres can become irregular through a striving for individual greatness: if we follow the perspective of Benedetto Croce (1902), a literary work is great because it defies genres, because it is *sui generis*.

By contrast, the forms of genres in oral traditions are sustained by the forms of everyday speech in everyday life. Thus the *Kunstsprache* of oral tradition allows its participants to “connect,” even in modern times (Martin 1993.227): “Modern hearers of a traditional epic in cultures where the song making survives are observed to comment appreciatively on the smallest verbal changes, not in the way a three-year-old demands the exact words of a bedtime text, but with a full knowledge of the dozens of ways the teller could have spun out a line at a given point in the narrative. In a living oral tradition, people are exposed to verbal art constantly, not just on specific entertainment occasions, which can happen every night in certain seasons. When they work, eat, drink, and do other social small-group activities, myth, song, and saying are always woven into their talk. Consequently, it is not inaccurate to describe them as bilingual, fluent in their natural language but also in the *Kunstsprache* of their local verbal art forms.”

## ***Bibliography***

Bakker, E. J. 1997. *Poetry in Speech. Orality and Homeric Discourse*. Ithaca. An empirical study of syntactical patterns typical of oral traditions and even of “everyday” speech, as preserved in the text of the Homeric poems.

Bauman, R. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights IL. A sophisticated analysis of various types and degrees of interaction between performance and composition as combined aspects of oral traditions.

Bausinger, H. 1980. *Formen der “Volkspoesie.”* 2nd ed. Berlin. A historical study of culturally and ideologically determined distinctions between “high art” and “low art,” as associated respectively with literary and oral traditions.

Ben-Amos, D. 1976. “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres.” *Folklore Genres* (ed. D. Ben-Amos) 215-242. Austin. A wide-ranging survey of variations in the forms and functions of genres in oral traditions.

Blackburn, S. H., Claus, P. J., Flueckiger, J. B., and Wadley, S. S., eds. 1989. *Oral Epics in India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles. Ethnographic approaches to oral traditions as analyzed {535|536} in their historical contexts, with special attention to the mechanics of diffusion (and the changes related to the widening or narrowing of the radius of diffusion). A striking example of the potential coextensiveness of oral and written traditions: oral traditions can aetiologize themselves in terms of written traditions (p. 32 n. 25).

Croce, B. 1902. *Estetica*. 2nd ed. Bari. A foundational meditation on creative tensions between great works of literature and the genres to which they are supposed to belong.

Davidson, O. M. 1999. *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetry*. Bibliotheca Iranica: Intellectual Traditions Series no. 4. Costa Mesa CA. Explores the intellectual history of expanding the methodology of comparative literature by including the study of oral poetics, especially with reference to classical literary forms that stem ultimately from oral traditions.

Finnegan, R. 1976. “What is Oral Literature Anyway? Comments in the Light of Some African and Other Comparative Material.” In Stolz, B. A., and Shannon, R. S., eds. 1976. *Oral Literature and the Formula*, 127-166. Ann Arbor. Disputes any universalizing distinction between orality and literacy, claiming that Parry and Lord had sought to establish such a distinction. An underlying assumption in the book: that the concept of “oral” can be equated with anything that is performed. Both the claim and the assumption are disputed by Lord 1995.

Foley, J. M. 1985. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York. The editor’s Introduction offers a general survey of a wide range of oral

traditions throughout the world, with extensive bibliography of ongoing research applying the methods of Parry, Lord, and others.

Gavrilov, A. K. 1997. "Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity." *Classical Quarterly* 47:56-73. Investigates the cultural and cognitive variables of "silent reading" and reading out loud; concludes that a mutually exclusive dichotomy is untenable.

Goody, J., and Watt, I. 1968. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (ed. J. Goody) 27-68. Cambridge. Argues that literacy produces measurable differences in cognitive capacity; the argument is weakened by a lack of descriptive specificity in considering the forms of oral traditions in any given historical context.

Guillén, C. 1985. *Entre lo uno y lo diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada*. Barcelona. = 1993. *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 42. Cambridge MA. Situates the study of oral traditions within the academic discipline of Comparative Literature.

Johnson, J. W. 1980. "Yes, Virginia, There Is an Epic in Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 11:308-326. A spirited polemic concerning the application of universalizing criteria in describing the genres of oral traditions.

Lord, A. B. 1953. "Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 94:124-134. Rewritten, with minimal changes, in Lord 1991.38-48 (with an "Addendum 1990" at pp. 47-48). An engaging attempt to reconcile the transmitted text of the Homeric poems, as a historical given, with empirical observations about the process of composition-in-performance as found in living oral traditions.

Lord, A. B. 1960 / 2000. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24. Cambridge MA. 2nd ed., with new Introduction, by S. Mitchell and G. Nagy 2000. This book remains the most definitive introduction to the pioneering research of Parry and Lord. The first part documents their findings in the course of their ethnographic research on the living oral traditions that they recorded in the former Yugoslavia; the second part applies these findings as points of comparison with the {536|537} textual evidence of ancient Greek and medieval European epic.

Lord, A. B. 1974. "Perspectives on Recent Work on Oral Literature." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 10:1-21. A bibliographical essay surveying the ongoing research on oral traditions throughout the world. A vital supplement to the abbreviated bibliography given here.



Lord, A. B. 1986a. "Perspectives on Recent Work on the Oral Traditional Formula." *Oral Tradition* 1:467-503. Continuation of the bibliographical survey in Lord 1974. Another vital supplement.

Lord, A. B. 1986b. "The Merging of Two Worlds: Oral and Written Poetry as Carriers of Ancient Values." In Foley, J. M., ed. 1986. *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*, 19-64. Columbia MO. A seminal study of historical coextensiveness between the poetry performed in the coffee houses, as observed by Parry and Lord, and the poetry of the court poets in the "good old days" of Ottoman rule.

Lord, A. B. 1991. *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*. Ithaca. Explores oral "lyric" as well as "epic." In-depth reassessments of debates over orality and literacy.

Lord, A. B. 1995. *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (ed. M. L. Lord). Ithaca. A posthumous publication, originally intended as a direct continuation of *Singer of Tales*. Sustained rebuttal of critics who insist on the inferiority of "orality" to literacy.

Martin, R. P. 1989. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca. A case study of oral poetic sub-genres embedded within the "super-genre" of epic, with special attention to applications of "speech-act" theory.

Martin, R. P. 1993. "Telemachus and the Last Hero Song." *Colby Quarterly* 29:222-240. A critical reassessment of epic as the essential genre of "heroic" poetry.

Mitchell, S., and Nagy, G. 2000. "Introduction to the Second Edition." In Lord 2000:vii-xxix. Offers historical background on the evolution of Lord's work and on its connections to the earlier work of Parry. Summarizes the impact of Parry's and Lord's combined legacy on such fields as Classics, Comparative Literature, and folklore studies.

Nagy, G. 1990. *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore. Revised paperback version 1994. Examines the interactions of theme / formula / meter in both "epic" and "lyric" traditions, with special reference to the historical context of archaic Greece.

Nagy, G. 1996. *Homeric Questions*. Austin. Addresses ten basic "misreadings" of Parry and Lord; provides explanatory models for the historical contingencies of transition from oral to written traditions.

Nagy, G. 1998. "Homer as 'Text' and the Poetics of Cross-Reference." *Verschriftung und Verschriftlichung: Aspekte des Medienwechsels in verschiedenen Kulturen und Epochen* (eds. C. Ehler and U. Schaefer) 78-87. *ScriptOralia* 94. Tübingen.

Nagy, G. 2000. "Reading Greek Poetry Aloud: Evidence from the Bacchylides Papyri." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 64:7-28. Examines phenomena of literacy that defy universalization,

such as the practice of *scriptio continua* in archaic, classical, and post-classical Greek, to be contrasted with the practice of leaving spaces for word-boundaries, as in the traditions of writing Hebrew.

Nagy, J. F. 1986. "Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative." *Oral Tradition* 1:272-301. A detailed survey of evidence provided by the contents and the conventions of the narratives themselves.

Niditch, S. 1996. *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*. Library of ancient Israel. Louisville KY. A lively confrontation of scripture, as the ultimate written word, with the rhetoric of the spoken word.

Oesterreicher, W. 1993. "Verschriftung und Verschriftlichung im Kontext medialer und konzeptioneller Schriftlichkeit." *Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter* (ed. U. Schaefer) 267-292. Tübingen. Shows that the historical circumstances of transformations from non-literate to literate societies are notable for their diversity.

Okpewho, I. 1979. *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*. New York. A sound ethnographic and literary survey, leading to a critical reassessment of epic as a genre.

Opland, J. 1989. "Xhosa: The Structure of Xhosa Eulogy and the Relation of Eulogy to Epic." In Hainsworth, J. B., and Hatto, A. T., eds. 1989. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry II: Characteristics and Techniques*, 121-143. London. This study describes a distinct genre, the praise poetry of the Xhosa, and then proceeds to compare it with the ancient Greek genre of epic. By recognizing praise poetry as distinct from epic, this work avoids the imposition of external models on the internal evidence of the oral tradition being examined.

Parry, M. [1971]. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (ed. A. Parry). Oxford. The first part contains Parry's work on the Homeric texts, before he undertook his fieldwork research in the former Yugoslavia. The second part combines his experience in fieldwork with his expertise in the organization of Homeric poetry.

Radloff, W. 1885. *Proben der Volksliteratur der nördlichen türkischen Stämme V: Der Dialekt der Kara-Kirgisen*. St. Petersburg. A distinguished prototype of research in the "field," with a focus on the oral traditions of Central Asia.

Reichl, K. 2000. *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Poetry*. Ithaca. Continues where Radloff left off, a century later. Centers on typological parallels to the oral traditions studied by Parry and Lord.

Slatkin, L. M. 1987. "Genre and Generation in the Odyssey." *METIS: Revue d'Anthropologie du Monde Grec Ancien* 1:259-268. Views genres in oral traditions as neatly complementary to each other, diachronically as well as synchronically.

Smith, P. 1974. "Des genres et des hommes," *Poétique* 19:294-312. Acute synchronic perspectives on the complementarity of genres in oral traditions.

Svenbro, J. 1988. *Phrasikleia: Anthropologie de la lecture en Grèce ancienne*. Paris. = 1993. *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*. Translation by J. Lloyd. Ithaca. Disputes universalist definitions of reading as a cognitive activity. Examines the mentality of equating the activity of reading out loud with the act of lending one's voice to the letters being processed by one's eyes.

Toelken, J. B. 1967. "An Oral Canon for the Child Ballads: Construction and Application." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 5:75-101. Vigorous application of comparative ethnographic evidence to {537|538} the text of a collection shaped by Child's text-bound criteria.

Zumthor, P. 1984. *La Poésie de la Voix dans la civilisation médiévale*. Paris. Uses the textual evidence of medieval literature to highlight the dynamics of oral traditions as revealed by the variability or *mouvance* inherent in the textual transmission.

Zwettler, M. J. 1978. *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*. Columbus. Studies the rich documentation of variant readings in the textual history of Arabic poetry as a reflex of variations in oral poetry.