

Chapter 3

“The Art of Printing was Fatal”: Print Commerce and the Idea of Oral Tradition in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse

Paula McDowell

In a series of lectures delivered in 1964, Walter J. Ong observed the way that a sudden awareness of media shift in one generation seemed to trigger groundbreaking insights into parallel historical moments:

Awareness of the succession of the media stages and wonder about the meaning of this succession are themselves the product of the succession. ... [O]nly as we have entered the electronic stage has man become aware of the profundity of differences, some of which have been before his eyes for thousands of years, namely, the differences between the old oral culture and the culture initiated with writing and matured with alphabetic type.¹

Ong suggested that new insights into “oral culture” in the late 1950s and early 1960s were the unexpected consequence of (hu)man’s entrance into the latest phase of their communications development, the “electronic stage.” A Jesuit priest, he expressed concern that the “great but distracting boon” of “artificially-contrived media” (electronic devices such as radio and television, but also writing and print) was threatening to displace “the word ... in its original and still natural habitat, the world of voice, of sound.”² Exactly two hundred years earlier, in 1764, clergyman and scholar Thomas Percy (1729–1811) drafted “An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England.” This essay would be appended to his anthology, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets, Together With Some Few of Later Date* (3 vols; London, 1765). Percy collected his “reliques” entirely from textual sources, but in his “Essay,” he represented the “Old Heroic Ballads” in his collection as the

¹ Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy, Yale University, 1964; expanded version published as *Presence of the Word*; quotation appears at p. 17-18..

² Ong, *Presence of the Word*, p. x.

“select remains of our ancient English bards and minstrels,” “oral itinerant poet[s]” who “probably never committed [their rhymes] to writing.”³ He suggested that these minstrels were at one time generously rewarded by those in power for the important sociocultural function that they served, but that by “the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign [1558–1603] ... the genuine old minstrelsy seems to have been extinct.” Attempting to account for this “extinct[ion],” he modeled a nearly-literal confrontation between these dignified “oral ... poets” and “a new race of ballad-writers ... an inferior sort of minor poets, who wrote narrative songs merely for the press.”⁴ Like Ong, Percy modeled historic communications developments as in some ways *devolutionary*. In his scenario, ancient minstrels and their successors, modern balladmongers, are not participants in one continuous artistic tradition; rather, the institutionalization of the commercial press contributed to the “extinct[ion]” of an earlier (and superior) cultural practice based on voice. Percy’s harshest critic, ballad-collector Joseph Ritson (1752–1803), virulently disagreed with his theories of “ancient minstrelsy,” but he nonetheless concurred that the sixteenth-century spread of print was responsible for the decay of minstrelsy. In his “Observations on the Ancient English Minstrels,” prefaced to his collection, *Ancient Songs From the Time of King Henry the Third, to the Revolution* (London, 1790 [*sic; recte* 1792]), Ritson declared: “The art of printing was fatal to the Minstrels who sung; people began to read, and, unfortunately for the Minstrels, their compositions would not bear reading.”⁵

Eighteenth-century Britain saw the emergence of an extensive print discourse about ballads. In prefaces to printed collections, in essays printed in these collections, in commentaries in periodicals, and elsewhere, a wide variety of authors commented positively and negatively on balladry as a hybrid oral and textual practice. These commentators had diverse (and sometimes competing) agendas, but almost without exception, in writing about ballads they explicitly expressed their awareness of the dramatic contemporary expansion of the print marketplace. While a few early eighteenth-century commentators celebrated the press as contributing to “British Manufacture and Trade,” most later commentators concurred that the nexus of print, commerce, and balladry had produced a “great quantity of sad trash.”⁶

Today, many ballad scholars follow the great nineteenth-century scholar, Francis James Child (1825–96), in dividing ballads into two principal categories, traditional (or “popular”) vs. broadside ballads, but in the early eighteenth century this conceptual division did not exist. As Albert B. Friedman observes:

³ Percy, *Reliques*, “Preface,” 1.7–15, 7; “Essay on Minstrels,” 1.345–81, 348, 380. Quotations from Percy’s *Reliques* are here taken from the three volume 1886 edition ed. Wheatley (rpt. Dover, 1966).

⁴ Percy, “Essay on Minstrels,” 1.380–81.

⁵ Ritson, “Observations on Minstrels,” *Ancient Songs*, pp. i–xxvi; xvii.

⁶ Motherwell, “Introduction,” *Minstrelsy*, 1.1–136, 58n. Quotations from Motherwell’s *Minstrelsy*, are here taken from the two volume reprint edition (Boston, 1846).

The traditional ballads ("Sir Patrick Spens," "Edward," and the like), those canonized in Professor Child's monumental collection [were] not even tentatively differentiated from other ballads until well along in the eighteenth century. Before that time, a ballad, so far as either men of letters or plain citizens were concerned, was a doggerel poem written to a familiar tune, printed on a folio sheet or long slip, and sold at bookstalls or hawked about the streets by ballad-singers.⁷

Ballads still circulated widely in manuscript and by voice, but they were now almost routinely associated with "cheap print."⁸ Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, the polite ballad revival and especially the rise of ballad scholarship would forge significantly new ways of conceptualizing ballads. Whereas early eighteenth-century commentators such as Joseph Addison largely took for granted the multimedia nature of balladry (oral, written, printed), later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ballad scholars would increasingly model a distinct "oral tradition" of balladry that was threatened or displaced by commercial *print*, and they would model themselves as working to "rescue" this tradition before it was too late.

Percy's "Essay on Minstrels" implicitly asks, when did ballads first become a major category of commercial print in England? The present essay, by way of contrast, asks when did ballads first come to be especially valued by scholars as "oral tradition"? Twenty-five years ago, Dianne Dugaw observed that many folklorists were reluctant to relinquish their conception of ballads as "unwritten" and non-commercial: "they contend that an unwritten song, a song from oral tradition, differs in some intrinsic way from one in print."⁹ Today, most ballad scholars reject binary (or tripartite) models of balladry. As Adam Fox observes of "Chevy Chase," for which printed copies date back to 1624 and manuscript transcriptions to c. 1557–65, "it is difficult to know whether to describe such a ballad as the product of oral, scribal, or print culture."¹⁰ But as Fox's phrase "oral, scribal, *or* print culture" here suggests (my emphasis), it is easier for us to agree that rigid binary (or tripartite) models of transmission are unsatisfactory than to move beyond them. The especially problematic "displacement" model of print and orality that I focus on here, whereby print is imagined as having displaced an earlier, more valuable oral tradition, has arguably been replaced by what Dugaw has identified as a still-problematic "metaphor of cross-pollination": "oral and printed, folk and commercial" traditions are still modeled as fundamentally distinct entities, each "exert[ing] their influences upon each other in turn."¹¹ Both "displacement" and "cross-pollination" models are predicated on an initial

⁷ Friedman, *Ballad Revival*, p. 6-7.

⁸ Ballads were in fact among the largest classes of printed materials since the beginning of printing in England; see Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 11.

⁹ Dugaw, "Anglo-American Folksong Reconsidered," p. 83.

¹⁰ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, p. 5.

¹¹ Dugaw, "Anglo-American Folksong Reconsidered," p. 86.

conceptual separation of oral and textual (especially printed) balladry. But where did this conceptual separation come from? When did ballad scholars first begin to forge a sharp distinction between printed (especially broadside) ballads and another set of practices they defined as “oral”?

As Nicholas Hudson has reminded us, the concept of “oral tradition” is not timeless and universal.¹² For most English authors writing in 1700, this term would have first brought to mind a Catholic theological notion considered suspect by Protestants. (Whereas Protestants privileged Scripture, Catholics emphasized the stability of the unwritten tradition of the Church.) Throughout the century, the dominant understanding of “oral tradition” remained theological, but one increasingly sees this notion explored in an ethnographic context. In 1724, Jesuit missionary Joseph François Lafitau suggested in his influential *Moeurs des sauvages américains* that “savage” societies without writing might nonetheless have a highly developed system of laws, customs, and arts preserved through “tradition” (oratory, ceremonies, music and dance).¹³ The later eighteenth century would see landmark arguments for “oral tradition” in the sense of complex works of verbal art passed down across generations without the use of letters. In 1760, Scottish Highlander James Macpherson published *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, And Translated from the Galic or Erse Language*, notoriously claiming that he had reconstructed the works of a great Highland bard, Ossian, passed down from the third century chiefly by word of mouth.¹⁴ Nine years later, antiquarian Robert Wood advanced the first detailed case for Homeric orality in his *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (1769; rev. ed. 1775).¹⁵ Macpherson’s claims for a sophisticated *native* tradition of oral poetry were considered scandalous by many, but they also triggered extensive research and brought debates concerning “oral tradition” to a very wide audience. Meanwhile, Wood’s suggestion that Homer was unable to read or write was similarly greeted with scorn, but it also influenced the German classicist F.A. Wolf, whose *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) would later influence the great twentieth-century Homer scholar Milman Parry.¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, we see an epochal shift in ideas of (and attitudes towards) “oral tradition,” and the crystallization of the modern secularized version of this concept.

¹² Hudson, “Oral Tradition,” pp. 161–76; see also Hudson, “Constructing Oral Tradition,” pp. 240–55.

¹³ The full title is *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (2 vols; Paris, 1724).

¹⁴ Macpherson, *Fragments* (Edinburgh, 1760), rpt. in Gaskill, ed., *Poems of Ossian*, pp. 1–31.

¹⁵ Significantly, in 1775 Wood’s *Essay* (wr. 1767; pub. London, 1769) was reprinted with additions as *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (my emphasis). References are to the 1775 edition.

¹⁶ See Adam Parry, ed., *The Making of Homeric Verse*.

Percy's conjectural account of minstrels as "oral itinerant poet[s]" also greatly spurred interest in the notion of "oral tradition." Twenty-three-year-old ballad collector John Pinkerton (1758–1826), enthralled by his reading of the *Reliques*, prefaced his collection of *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (London, 1781) with an ambitious "Dissertation On the Oral Tradition of Poetry."¹⁷ In the nineteenth century, ballad collectors such as Walter Scott (1771–1832) and William Motherwell (1797–1835) worked to trace what they saw as a still-living "oral tradition" of balladry. In preparing his anthology *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (2 vols; Glasgow, 1827), Motherwell increasingly aspired to collect ballads directly from oral performance and recitation rather than from texts. But although his collecting practices differed dramatically from Percy's, it is significant that he followed Percy and Ritson in hypothesizing an epochal sixteenth-century displacement of "ancient minstrelsy" by commercial print. In the Elizabethan period, Motherwell concurred, minstrel compositions were "superseded in vulgar affection" by (inferior) broadside ballads. By the end of the nineteenth century, this now-naturalized "displacement" model of oral balladry versus print balladmongering would evolve into Child's profoundly influential classificatory (and evaluative) distinction between traditional and broadside ballads. Child defined "traditional" ballads as those stemming from more authentic oral traditions. He suggested that in contrast with more valuable (and still traceable) traditional ballads passed down through voice, "the vulgar ballads of our day, the 'broadsides' which were printed in such huge numbers in England and elsewhere in the sixteenth century or later," belong to an entirely "different genus."¹⁸

This essay argues that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ballad critics, responding to the perceived dramatic spread of print in their own time, contributed significantly to the emergence of our modern secular concept of "oral tradition." Whereas early eighteenth-century commentators tended to understand the oral and print dissemination of ballads as working in tandem (with positive or negative consequences), later commentators increasingly posited a distinct "oral tradition" of balladry that was antithetical to and threatened by commercial print. One way to denaturalize binary models of oral and textual balladry, I propose, is to understand where this conceptual separation came from in the first place. Comparing early eighteenth-century discussions of balladry, wherein ballads are assumed to be oral *and* printed, commercial *and* culturally influential, to later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions, will help us to recognize the central role of ballad scholarship in shaping the idea of "oral tradition." Ballad scholars increasingly forged a sharp conceptual (not actual) separation of "oral" and "printed" ballads. In so doing, they contributed to the binary model of "orality and literacy" through which we now almost inevitably comprehend ballads.

¹⁷ Pinkerton, *Scottish Tragic Ballads*, pp. ix–xxvii.

¹⁸ Child, "Ballad Poetry," p. 218.

“Something ... to hit every Taste”

The dichotomy between ancient minstrels and modern balladmongers that structures Percy’s “Essay” is completely absent from Addison’s papers on ballads in the *Spectator* (1711).¹⁹ Mr Spectator makes no attempt to theorize an especially valuable “oral” tradition of balladry that is separable from print. He expresses his “Delight in hearing” ballads and his “exquisite Pleasure” in reading broadsides. Even the fact that broadsides are often found in “despicable Circumstances” (such as pasted on the walls of country houses) does not lessen the satisfaction he takes in reading these “Printed Paper[s]” he associates with “the Rabble of a Nation” (nos. 70, 85). Addison introduced ballads into the *Spectator* in order to make a point about polite *writing*. While his ballads papers are often read separately today, they were originally part of an ongoing discussion of “true and false wit.” Addison assumed that the ballads he was discussing were originally “written” (for example, “At the Time the Poem we are now treating of was written”), and he neither conceptualized nor valorized something we might now label “popular oral culture.” He held up two carefully selected examples of ballads—the heroic, patriotic “Chevy Chase” and the sentimental “Two Children in the Wood”—in order to illustrate the virtues of simplicity of style and thought in literary composition and to advance a case against “the Gothick [i.e. baroque] Manner in Writing.”

Eleven years later, the editor of *Applebee’s Journal* published a letter from one “Jeffrey Sing-Song,” titled “The Ballad-maker’s Plea.”²⁰ While Mr Sing-Song’s own name emphasizes the oral aspects of balladry, his “Plea” argues for the centrality of ballad “Manufacture” (that is, the printing of broadsides) to British trade. Like Mr Spectator, Mr Sing-Song implicitly associates ballads with broadsides. He does not see oral and print balladry as competing, and he certainly does not see valuable oral practices of balladry (what he cleverly calls “Lingua-facture”) as “lost.” Mr Sing-Song identifies himself as “by Trade a British Manufacturer.” Convinced of the virtue, not degradation, of commerce, he laments that the “Trade” of balladry is “of late ... under a sensible Decay.” He notes that a well-known ballad “Manufacturer” has been arrested: “the greatest Merchant in that kind of Goods has been taken up lately for something done *in his Way*, a little out of the Way, &c.”²¹ Mr Sing-Song does not specify this “Manufacturer’s” name or alleged crime, but it appears that he has been taken up for printing Jacobite ballads. Mr Sing-Song concludes his “Plea” with a veiled threat, offering to

¹⁹ Addison, *Spectator*, nos. 70 (May 21, 1711), 74 (May 25, 1711) and 85 (June 7, 1711). Quotations are taken from Bond, ed., *Spectator*, vol. 1.

²⁰ “Jeffrey Sing-Song” [Daniel Defoe?], “The Ballad-maker’s Plea,” *Applebee’s Journal*, Oct. 13, 1722, rpt. in Lee, ed., *Daniel Defoe*, 3.57–60. I discuss “The Ballad-maker’s Plea” and the tradition of political balladry it engages with in further detail in “Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*,” pp. 151–78.

²¹ “Jeffrey Sing-Song” [Daniel Defoe?], “The Ballad-maker’s Plea,” 3.58–9.

“furnish” some protest ballads should the Merchant and his “Fellows” be put to death for treasonous publication:

[S]hall the jolly Fellows that may chance to Swing upon this Occasion, have never a *Passing Song* for them, as well as they have a *Passing Bell* at *St. Sepulchre’s*?

Never fear it, I can furnish you with something suitable to every Occasion, and you shall perhaps have a Test of my Performance very speedily.²²

Mr Sing-Song is proud, not condemnatory, of the links between ballads and commercial printing (and here, popular political expression). Both ballad “Manufacturers” (printers) and “Lingua-facturers” (singers) are, unashamedly, “Merchants of Goods,” and “it is by the Success of our Manufactures that our Nation is made happy, rich, powerful and great.”

One year after Mr Sing-Song published his “Plea,” an anonymous editor published the first two volumes of *A Collection of Old Ballads. Corrected from the best and most Ancient Copies Extant. With Introductions Historical, Critical, or Humorous, Illustrated with Copper Plates* (3 vols; London, 1723–5). The genesis of this collection remains uncertain. It was published by James Roberts, a trade publisher who typically published works on behalf of others, and it has recently been suggested that the collection was “a reprint commissioned by the then intellectual property owners made from printed versions held in their Ballad Warehouse.”²³ But the most noteworthy aspect of *A Collection* is arguably neither the mystery of its publication nor the 159 ballads it contains (most of them already in print), but the way that these ballads are presented to the reader. In a series of three lively Prefaces, the editor foregrounds his own economic motives for publishing ballads, but like Mr Sing-Song, he does so without suggesting that economic concerns necessarily preclude “higher” motives. He praises the historical, educative, and entertainment value of ballads, and he works to elevate their status by constructing an extraordinarily dignified lineage. The frontispiece to the first volume of *A Collection* depicts busts of ancient poets such as Homer, Pindar, and Horace alongside the highly esteemed modern poets Abraham Cowley and Sir John Suckling, and, in a statement whose significance we will appreciate in a moment, the editor asserts that “the very Prince of Poets, old *Homer*” was “nothing more than a blind *Ballad-Singer*, who writ Songs of the Siege of *Troy*.”²⁴ Admittedly, the tone of these “Prefaces” is unstable: the editor sometimes seems to satirize his own high-minded attempts. At other moments, though, he appears to abandon his self-satirizing style to assert the “real value” of ballads: “our old Songs I think ought to be preserv’d, and some of them are really valuable.”²⁵

²² Ibid., 3.59.

²³ St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, p. 345.

²⁴ *Collection of Old Ballads*, 1.iii, font reversed.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.iii.

Ultimately, both the editorial framing and the contents of *A Collection* suggest an entrepreneurial desire to attract readers and so maximize sales. The editor makes little (if any) attempt to rank different types of ballads. As the full title of *A Collection* makes clear, he especially values “Old Ballads” printed from “Ancient Copies.” But contrary to what we might expect, he is surprisingly uninterested in preserving “Old Ballads” for their own sake. Indeed, he notes that he has omitted “a great number of old Songs” because they were “written in so old and obsolete a stile that few or none of my Readers wou’d have understood ’em.”²⁶ While he argues for the usefulness of old ballads as sources of historical information, he does not privilege historical ballads over other types. In fact, he assures the reader that “those who have no Relish for these antique Pieces, may, in the other half of the Book, meet with Variety of Entertainment; there are serious and humourous Ballads, Scotch Songs; and something I hope to hit every Taste.”²⁷ In comparison to later scholarly collections of ballads—such as Percy’s dignified anthology of “Old Heroic Ballads”—*A Collection* is most striking for its miscellaneity and playfulness. Alongside historical narratives such as “The Battel of Agincourt” and sentimental favorites such as “The Children in the Wood,” one finds courtship songs and “Drinking songs” such as “The Praise of Sack” and “The Answer of Ale.” Furthermore, like Addison and Mr Sing-Song, the editor of *A Collection* makes no attempt to theorize an especially valuable “oral” tradition of balladry that is separable from print. Indeed, this editor associates ballads so closely with texts that he touts the usefulness of ballads in teaching children to read: “The Use of these Songs too is very great. I have known Children, who never would have learn’d to read, had they not took a Delight in poring over *Jane Shore*, or *Fair Rosamond*.”²⁸

“A blind *Ballad-singer*, who writ Songs of the Siege of Troy”

In attempting to show the “Antiquity” of balladry, the editor of *A Collection* suggests that Homer was an itinerant ballad-singer: “the very Prince of Poets, old *Homer*, if we may trust ancient Records, was nothing more than a blind *Ballad-singer*, who writ Songs of the Siege of *Troy*, and the Adventures of *Ulysses*; and playing the Tunes upon his Harp, sung from Door to Door.” It was not until after Homer’s death, he proposes, that an ancient Greek ballad collector “thought fit to collect all his Ballads, and by a little connecting ’em, gave us the *Iliad* and *Odyssees*, which since that Time have been so much admired.”²⁹ In asserting that Homer’s works were not linked together into epic poems until after his death, this editor echoes the views of the classical scholar Richard Bentley (1662–1742),

²⁶ Ibid., 3.vi–vii.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.v–vi.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.vii.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.iii–iv.

who suggested that the man named “Homer” was a relatively lowly entertainer, or rhapsode:

[Homer] wrote a sequel of Songs and Rhapsodies, to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer, at Festivals and other days of Merriment; the *Ilias* he made for the Men, and the *Odysseis* for the other Sex. These loose Songs were not connected together in the form of an Epic Poem, till *Pisistratus*’s time about 500 years after.³⁰

The eighteenth century would see a major reevaluation of Homeric poetry. Whereas neoclassical commentators valued what was universal and timeless in Homer and saw him as a divinely-inspired “genius,” later commentators increasingly understood this poetry as the product of a unique historical and geographical environment and sometimes as the work of multiple individuals. In the 1730s, Scottish classicist Thomas Blackwell reopened an ancient debate concerning Homeric literacy in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735). He proposed that Homer was a blind “strolling indigent Bard” who had little learning: that is, “such Learning as we get from Books.”³¹ In 1769, Robert Wood pushed these suggestions further, asking, “how far the use of Writing was known to Homer?”³² Anticipating “the Reader’s astonishment” at such a question, Wood reminded his contemporaries, “We are not far removed from the age, when great statesmen, and profound politicians, did not know their alphabet.”³³ Wood proposed that before the spread of writing, valuable knowledge was passed down across generations by “bards” who were “entrusted with the whole deposit of Law, History, and Religion, till the art of Writing introduced a more easy, faithful, and comprehensive method of recording things.”³⁴

Ossian “translator” James Macpherson and his defenders drew on (and helped to shape) these debates concerning Homeric literacy. Macpherson was a student at Marischal College, Aberdeen, where Blackwell was principal; he also came under the influence of Edinburgh clergyman and rhetorician Hugh Blair (1718–1800). Blair may have ghost-written the “Preface” to Macpherson’s *Fragments*. While the “Preface” does not ascribe these works to an entirely oral society, it asserts that “such poems were handed down from race to race; some in manuscript, but more by oral tradition.”³⁵ In 1763, Blair published his influential “Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian” as an appendix to the *Poems of Ossian* (1762–3). (A further “Appendix” was added in 1765.) Blair’s “Critical

³⁰ Bentley, *Remarks*, p. 18.

³¹ Blackwell, *Enquiry ... into Homer*, pp. 101, 103, 118.

³² Wood, *Essay on ... Homer*, p. 248.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³⁵ “Preface” to Macpherson, *Fragments*, rpt. in Gaskill, ed., *Poems of Ossian*, pp. 5–6, 5.

Dissertation” exemplifies stadial theory, or “four-stages” theory, which was then sweeping Britain (especially Scotland).³⁶ He associated Ossian’s “rude” poetry with a particular “stage” in an evolutionary model of human communications developments. Oral poetry was the primeval language of man in “the infancy of societies. ... before writing was invented, no other compositions, except songs or poems, could take such hold of the imagination and memory, as to be preserved by oral tradition.”³⁷ Blair famously labeled Ossian the “Homer of the Highlands,” but he insisted that the status of Celtic bards was far superior to Homer’s: “the Bards continued to flourish; not as a set of strolling songsters like the Greek ... Rhapsodists, in Homer’s time, but as an order of men highly respected in the state.”³⁸ Even more influentially, he proposed that “*until the present century*, almost every great family in the Highlands had their own bard, to whose office it belonged to be master of all the poems and songs of the country.”³⁹ These poems were thus part of a still-traceable *native* oral tradition. In a gentlemanly gesture towards “fieldwork”—an endeavor not systematically practiced until Motherwell’s labors in the 1820s—Blair proposed that reputable gentlemen should collect these works, recovering “oral tradition” by comparing “different oral editions of them” (that is, oral performances) with existing manuscript transcriptions and printed texts.⁴⁰ He appealed to his fellow clergymen to “make enquiry in their respective parishes” concerning persons who might be able to recite Ossianic poetry from memory, and he referenced the “testimony” of respected gentlemen who believed that they had heard such poetry, such as “Sir James Macdonald of Macdonald, in the Island of Sky, Baronet,” who claimed that “he had lately heard several parts of [Ossian’s poems] repeated in the original ... with some variations from the printed translation, such as might naturally be expected from the circumstance of oral tradition.”⁴¹ Blair’s “Dissertation” triggered extensive research in part by assuming the existence of “oral tradition” and positing a set of characteristics that “might naturally be expected.”⁴² But in his view, it was not the living song practices themselves but the testimony of literate gentlemen concerning them that ultimately authorized these practices as “tradition.”

³⁶ On stadial theory see Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. I discuss the emergence of modern evolutionary narratives of media shift in a current book project, “Print Commerce and the Invention of Oral Tradition in Eighteenth-Century Britain.”

³⁷ Blair, “A Critical Dissertation,” 1763; expanded edition with “Appendix,” 1765, rpt. in Gaskill, ed., *Poems of Ossian*, pp. 345–408, 345–6.

³⁸ Blair, “Appendix,” p. 403; “Critical Dissertation,” p. 350.

³⁹ Blair, “Appendix,” p. 403 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 405–6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 405.

“The art of printing was fatal”

Four decades after the publication of *A Collection of Old Ballads* (1723–5), Percy drew on it as one of his chief sources in assembling his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). In contrast with the miscellaneity and playfulness of *A Collection*, the *Reliques* proclaims its own selectivity and high seriousness. Published by James Dodsley, a major literary publisher rather than a trade publisher, and edited by a learned curate who assured his readers that “great care has been taken to admit nothing immoral and indecent,” Percy’s *Reliques* definitively established *certain types* of balladry as worthwhile objects of genteel appreciation and scholarly study.⁴³ It cannot be over-emphasized that Percy only *selectively* valorized ballads. In his view, only select ballad traditions were worthy of being saved. One does not find here the type of oppositional political ballads alluded to by Mr Sing-Song, or the “Drinking Songs” touted by the editor of *A Collection* as likely to appeal to many readers’ tastes. Instead, Percy favored “Old Heroic Ballads” such as “The Battle of Otterbourne” and “Chevy Chase.” He extensively revised the language of many ballads to make them acceptable to polite taste, and he later described these rewritings as “conjectural emendations ... without which the collection would not have deserved a moment’s attention.”⁴⁴ As is well known, Percy’s most valued source was his fortuitously found “old Folio M.S. Collection of Historical Ballads &c.,” which he especially treasured because it was not commercial. But Percy also consulted huge numbers of broadsides. In 1761, he visited Cluer Dicey, the most prolific ballad printer of the day, who had graciously promised to “romage into his Warehouse for every thing curious that it contains.” Dicey presented him with more than eighty ballads, but Percy never publicly acknowledged Dicey’s assistance in the *Reliques*. Although *both* men were involved in the publishing of ballads, Dicey was in Percy’s view a mere balladmonger—a huckster of commodities rather than a scholar. In a letter to a genteel friend, Percy described Dicey as “the greatest printer of Ballads in the kingdom”—but also, significantly, as “an Acquaintance ... of a much lower stamp.”⁴⁵ Percy also greatly downplayed the extent of his debt to archival collections of broadside ballads. Although he acknowledged his debt to the Pepys Collection of broadside ballads at Cambridge University, he scorned the group of ballads which would later form part of the Roxburghe Collection as “Such as are still sold on stalls; not one in a hundred of them fit to be republished.”⁴⁶

Percy hypothesized that his “relics” were the written traces of originally oral compositions dating back to a sophisticated feudal society before commercial

⁴³ Percy, “Preface,” 1.15.

⁴⁴ Letter to Robert Jamieson, April 4, 1801, rpt. in Nichols, *Illustrations*, 8.341.

⁴⁵ Letter to William Shenstone, July 19, 1761, in Brooks, ed., *Percy Letters*, 7.108-9.

⁴⁶ Letter of Sept. 11, 1773, in Falconer, ed, *Percy Letters*, 6.69.

print. He modeled a “great divide”⁴⁷ between ancient minstrels and the degenerate modern distributors of broadside ballads. Like Blair distinguishing Celtic and Gothic bards from the “strolling songsters” of ancient Greece, Percy modeled ancient minstrels as far more than mere entertainers. In his view, these men recorded honorable feats and aristocratic genealogies and were supported by a culture of patronage in a society where poetry and music were cherished by those in power. As late as the reign of Henry VIII, the minstrels’ situation was “honourable and lucrative.”⁴⁸ But by the end of the sixteenth century, he suggested, “this profession had fallen into such discredit that it was considered in law as a nuisance.”⁴⁹ What caused this relatively rapid “extinct[ion]” of an ancient cultural practice in Percy’s view? Not coincidentally, as we have seen, Percy traced the decline of minstrelsy to the reign of Queen Elizabeth, immediately after the Worshipful Company of Stationers received its royal charter of incorporation (granted by Queen Mary in 1557 and ratified by Elizabeth in 1558). The same period to which Percy dated the “extinct[ion]” of “the genuine old minstrelsy” also saw the institutionalization of commercial printing and a steep rise in the number of printed books. Percy’s “Essay” ends abruptly with the royally-authorized retailing of cheap printed goods: “little miscellanies, under the name of Garlands.”⁵⁰ With their royally-granted privileges and their ephemeral products circulating “in such abundance,” it was members of the Stationers Company, not worthy “oral itinerant poets,” who now had a “lucrative” situation. Percy concluded his narrative with the sixteenth-century decay of minstrelsy, but not without pausing to assert that the situation of contemporary ballad-singers was even worse. Even the Elizabethan minstrels, who had “lost much of their dignity, and were sinking into contempt and neglect ... still sustained a character far superior to anything we can conceive at present of the singers of old ballads.”⁵¹

The *Reliques* established Percy’s reputation as a scholar. It was also a huge commercial success. Yet Percy suffered tremendous anxiety about printing his work. In the “Preface,” he was careful to model himself as a disinterested gentleman rather than a Grubstreet compiler. Of his exhaustive labors and 1200-page anthology, he stated, “To prepare it for the press has been the amusement of now and then a vacant hour amid the leisure and retirement of a rural life.”⁵² For Percy, and for virtually all learned ballad collectors after him, redefining balladry as a fit object of study meant separating scholarly collections from mere vendible commodities. As I have suggested, Joseph Ritson virulently disagreed with

⁴⁷ I have borrowed this term from Finnegan, who critiques evolutionary models of a “great divide in human development between ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ stages of society” in *Literacy and Orality*, p. vi and passim.

⁴⁸ Percy, “Essay on Minstrels,” 1.373.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.363.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.381.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.375.

⁵² Percy, “Preface,” 1.14.

Percy's theories of minstrelsy. Yet in publishing his own collections, such as *A Select Collection of English Songs* (3 vols; London, 1783) and the aforementioned *Ancient Songs* (1790 [*sic*; *recte* 1792]), Ritson too modeled his work as "impelled by no lucrative or unworthy motives." Both men drew heavily on printed (especially broadside) ballads. But even Ritson, who valued broadsides, emphasized that he had braved the swelling tide of print anthologies only to rescue ballad "pearls":

So long as these beauties, this elegance, continue to be ... buried alive, in a multitude of collections, consisting chiefly of compositions of the lowest, and most despicable nature; one or more being annually hashed up (*crambe repetita*) by needy retainers to the press ... the greater part of this inestimable possession must, of course, remain altogether unknown to the generality of readers. ... Every one who wishes to possess a pearl, is not content to seek it in an ocean of mud.⁵³

Ritson was ambivalent about print commerce just as Percy was, yet he was unwilling to adopt the latter's idealizing theories of minstrelsy. In his own ambitious essays, such as "A Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song" prefaced to *A Select Collection* or the aforementioned "Observations on Minstrels," he suggested that there were much stronger links between "ancient minstrels" and modern balladmongers than Percy was willing to admit.⁵⁴ The primary function of *both* minstrels and ballad-singers was entertainment, and their chief audience was the "illiterate vulgar."⁵⁵ Ritson quoted Percy's statement that the minstrels "continued down to the reign of Elizabeth; in whose time they had lost much of their dignity," only to scoff, "As to dignity; it is pretty clear they never had any to lose."⁵⁶ He agreed that broadside ballads displaced earlier minstrel traditions, but he saw this as a shift to celebrate rather than lament. For Ritson, the institutionalization of the press marked the welcome "origin of the modern English song; not a single composition of that nature, with the smallest degree of poetical merit, being discoverable at any preceding period."⁵⁷

Ritson suggested that the majority of Percy's "reliques" were *never* separate from commercial print: "That these ballads were originally composed for public singers by profession, and perhaps immediately for printers, booksellers, or those who vended such like things, is highly probable." Tracing the history of "modern English song" not only to "the earliest ages of mankind" but also to

⁵³ Ritson, "Preface," *Select Collection*, 1.xiii, i.

⁵⁴ For Ritson's "Observations on Minstrels," see n. 5. Ritson's "Dissertation on the Songs, Music, and Vocal and Instrumental Performance of the Ancient English" was prefaced to *Ancient Songs*, pp. xxvii–lxxvi, and his "Historical Essay on National Song" was prefaced to *Select Collection*, 1.i–lxxii.

⁵⁵ Ritson, "Historical Essay," 1.lii.

⁵⁶ Ritson, "Observations on Minstrels," p. x.

⁵⁷ Ritson, "Historical Essay," 1.lvi.

seventeenth-century “writers by profession of amusing books for the populace,” he named as “famous ballad-makers about this period” several authors whom many of his contemporaries would have considered Grubstreet hacks (such as Martin Parker, Thomas Deloney, and Aphra Behn).⁵⁸ Even more provocatively, he expressed a preference for broadside ballads over “minstrel compositions.” He suggested that even in the Elizabethan period, “minstrel songs,” with “their wild and licentious metre,” did not stand a chance against the products of the press. Broadside ballads, with their relative regularity and simplicity, were thought by the masses to be more poetical than earlier forms, and “though critics will judge otherwise, the people at large were to decide, and did decide: and in some respects at least not without justice.”⁵⁹ Significantly, these printed ballads were the “favourite compositions” of the people because they could be easily sung: “the songs used by the ballad-singers ... were smooth and regular, were all printed, and, what was much more to their advantage, were generally united to a simple but pleasing melody, which ... any one could sing.”⁶⁰ Like etymologist Nathan Bailey, who defined “ballad” as “a Song *commonly sung* up and down the Streets,”⁶¹ Ritson understood balladry as a *living* oral practice (though *not* necessarily as “oral tradition”). In a ground-breaking move in scholarly ballad-collecting, he included the “airs” to the songs he reprinted whenever they were known.⁶²

But although Ritson endorsed the verdict of “the people at large” in valuing ballads, it is important to understand that neither he nor Percy possessed a concept anything like our modern idea of “folk authorship,” or valorized what we might now call “popular oral culture.” Neither of these gentlemen viewed “the illiterate vulgar” as a positive generative force. Ritson understood “the people at large” as assisting in the *preservation* of ballads rather than as significant creators, and Percy aligned his ancient minstrels with aristocratic courts. Furthermore, neither man advanced claims for oral tradition as a complex body of verbal art passed down across generations solely by word of mouth. Percy never proposed that minstrels were the product of wholly oral societies, and Ritson bluntly expressed his skepticism concerning claims being made by others for “oral tradition.” He rejected Macpherson’s Ossian “translations” as fraudulent and he remarked of the proposition of still-extant “ancient” ballads: “it is barely possible that something of the kind may be still preserved in the country by tradition. The Editor has frequently heard of traditional songs, but has had very little success in his endeavours to hear the songs themselves.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid., I.lviii–lxi.

⁵⁹ Ritson, “Observations on Minstrels,” pp. xxiii.

⁶⁰ “Dissertation on the Songs” and “Observations on Minstrels,” pp. lxxiii and xviii respectively.

⁶¹ Bailey, *Universal Etymological Dictionary* (my emphasis).

⁶² Volume 3 of *A Select Collection* consists entirely of airs to the songs.

⁶³ Ritson, “Dissertation on the Songs,” p. lxxv. For Ritson’s comments on Macpherson, see his “Historical Essay,” I.xxxvi.

At the same time, though, Percy's romantic account of ancient minstrels as "oral itinerant poets" enthralled later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers, and in so doing contributed significantly to the now-rapidly growing interest in "oral tradition." Edinburgh native John Pinkerton's "Dissertation On the Oral Tradition of Poetry," prefixed to his *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781), exemplifies the cross-fertilization in this period between the Ossian debates, new theories of Homeric orality, and ballad scholarship. Pinkerton's "Dissertation" is deeply indebted to Blair's "Critical Dissertation," but it also does something new. In explicitly titling his essay "A Dissertation On the Oral Tradition of Poetry," and prefixing it to a collection of *ballads*, Pinkerton foregrounded "oral tradition" as a central concern of ballad scholarship. Employing an increasingly familiar "devolution" model of balladry, as well as the terminology of "success[ion]" and "extinct[ion]," he lamented that the "successors of Ossian the first of poets were at length employed chiefly in the mean office of preserving fabulous genealogies, and flattering the pride of their chieftains at the expence of truth. ... That order of men, I believe, is now altogether extinct."⁶⁴ Whereas Percy's "Essay" had only gestured towards an evolutionary (or devolutionary) model of media shift, Pinkerton explicitly modeled an inevitable development whereby one stage "necessarily" succeeds another. He proposed to give an "account of the utility of the Oral Tradition of Poetry, in that barbarous state of society which *necessarily* precedes the invention of letters."⁶⁵ Pinkerton's evolutionary model of media shift could not be more starkly confrontational: "In proportion as Literature [that is, letters] advanced in the world Oral Tradition disappeared."⁶⁶

Pinkerton's "Dissertation" also made a genuine contribution to our understanding of the unique characteristics of oral poetry. Pinkerton discussed oral poets' mnemonic devices, or "retentive arts": the ways that oral poets used versification (sound effects such as alliteration, refrains and rhyme) to "make their verses take such hold of the memory of their countrymen, as to be transmitted safe and entire without the aid of writing."⁶⁷ He also exhibited new insights into the workings of what Milman Parry would later label "oral formulaic epithets." He proposed that repeated epithets, formerly held to be lapses of the poet's genius, in fact served as "land-marks" for the reciting poet: "in the view of which the memory travelled secure over the intervening spaces."⁶⁸ Pinkerton does not appear to have surmised that traditional epithets actually helped oral poets to *compose* works extemporaneously rather than merely memorize them. (This would be Parry's ground-breaking insight in the late 1920s.⁶⁹) But the concluding sentence of his "Dissertation" gives a sense of the "wonder" with which later eighteenth- and

⁶⁴ Pinkerton, "Dissertation," *Scottish Tragic Ballads*, pp. xvi–xvii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. x (my emphasis).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

⁶⁹ See Adam Parry, *Making of Homeric Verse*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

nineteenth-century ballad scholars approached what seemed to them an exciting new idea of “oral tradition”:

When all the circumstances here hinted at are considered, we shall be less apt to wonder, that, by the concurrence of musical air, retentive arts in the composition, and chiefly of rime, the most noble productions of former periods have been preserved in the memory of a succession of admirers, and have had the good fortune to arrive at our times.⁷⁰

“Printed as they orally exist”

Percy’s romantic narrative of ancient minstrels as “oral itinerant poets” contributed not only to growing interest in the idea of oral tradition but also to some later ballad editors’ conviction that certain *living* practices of ballad-singing were surviving traces of feudal oral traditions. Walter Scott seized on Percy’s figure of the minstrel, developing it in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads Collected in the Southern Counties of Scotland; With A Few of Modern Date Founded Upon Local Tradition* (2 vols; Kelso, 1802). Scott argued that until very recently, a figure like Percy’s “ancient minstrels” could be seen in the pipers of Scottish border towns. In a later essay, “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry” (1830), Scott echoed Percy in suggesting that minstrel ballads were an *innately* oral art form displaced by print—especially cheap print aimed at certain “class[es] of readers” and hearers:

It is probable that the minstrels, seldom knowing either how to read or write, trusted to their well-exercised memories. ...

The press, however, at length superseded the necessity of such exertions of recollection, and sheafs of ballads issued from it weekly, for the amusement of the sojourners at the alehouse, and the lovers of poetry in grange and hall, where such of the audience as could not read had at least read unto them.⁷¹

Scott opened another essay of 1830 with an even more blunt statement exemplifying emergent evolutionary (and devolutionary) narratives of media shift: “The invention of printing *necessarily* occasioned the downfall of the Order of Minstrels.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Pinkerton, “Dissertation,” *Scottish Tragic Ballads*, p. xxvii.

⁷¹ Quotations from Scott’s *Minstrelsy* are here taken from the one volume reprint edited by Henderson (London, 1931). For Scott’s “Introductory Remarks,” see pp. 501–32; for this quotation, see p. 512–13.

⁷² “Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad” (1830), rpt. in Henderson, ed., *Minstrelsy*, pp. 535–67, 535 (my emphasis).

Like Scott, Glasgow journalist and civil servant William Motherwell saw himself as preserving a still living tradition of Scottish minstrelsy in his collection *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* (2 vols; Glasgow, 1827; rpt. Boston 1846). In his lengthy “Introduction” to this anthology, Motherwell described his subject as “the Ancient Romantick and Historick Ballad [sic] of Scotland.”⁷³ But whereas Scott collected his ballads from textual as well as oral sources, Motherwell increasingly set out to recover a distinctly *oral* tradition of balladry. He opened his collection with the bold claim: “This interesting body of popular poetry, part of which, in point of antiquity, may fairly be esteemed equal, if not superior, to the most ancient of our written monuments, has owed its preservation principally to oral tradition.”⁷⁴ Today known as the first systematic “field collector” of ballads, Motherwell transcribed songs from oral performance and recitation. Although he initially collected ballads from texts, he became interested in oral performance and transformed himself “from a culler of old volumes to a cultivator of old singers.”⁷⁵ Motherwell focused on the oral aspects of balladry to a greater degree than any previous collector had done, and his attention to performance allowed him to advance our understanding of how “oral tradition” actually *works*. Ballad scholars such as Percy and Ritson had long observed metrical differences between the “ancient” and more modern ballads in their collections. But Motherwell’s practice of *listening* to ballads led him to surmise that the metrical irregularity of the older ballads was linked to their originally oral nature: “they have throughout the marks of a composition not meant for being committed to writing, but whose musick formed an essential part.”⁷⁶ Motherwell’s “Introduction” is an important (and neglected) contribution to oral formulaic theory.⁷⁷ Anticipating Parry (and recalling Pinkerton) he too theorized the workings of traditional epithets. Repeated epithets, he proposed, were “ingenious devices, ... whereby oral poetry is more firmly imprinted on the memory, more readily recalled to it, when partially obliterated, and, in the absence of letters, the only efficacious means of preserving and transmitting it to after times.”⁷⁸

Motherwell’s practice of collecting ballads from oral sources led him to resituate authenticity in the voices of the “unlettered.” In sharp contrast with the view of Samuel Johnson, who had argued in the *Preface* to his *Dictionary* that written records are the only way to stabilize language, Motherwell argued that:

Language, which in the written literature of a country is ever varying, suffers no material changes nor corruptions among the lower and uneducated classes of society by whom it is spoken as their mother tongue. With them, primitive forms

⁷³ Motherwell, “Introduction,” *Minstrelsy*, 1.1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.3.

⁷⁵ McCarthy, “William Motherwell,” p. 300.

⁷⁶ Motherwell, “Introduction,” *Minstrelsy*, 1.23–4.

⁷⁷ An exception here is McCarthy, “William Motherwell.” See also Brown, *William Motherwell’s Cultural Politics*, pp. 1, 93.

⁷⁸ Motherwell, “Introduction,” *Minstrelsy*, 1.26.

of speech, peculiar idiomatick expressions, and antique phrases are still in use. . . . It is not, therefore, with the unlettered and the rude that oral song suffers vital and irremediable wrong.⁷⁹

Motherwell argued that scholars looking to preserve “traditionary” ballads needed to rethink their editorial practices. It was the oral tradition of the “uneducated,” not the corrupt texts of the lettered, that was in certain circumstances “a safe and almost unerring guide.”⁸⁰ In a letter to Walter Scott, Motherwell shared his growing belief in the importance of printing all significant variants rather than attempting to collate them into a “correct” version: “it is of some importance to preserve these remnants of ancient traditionary song in the exact state in which they pass from mouth to mouth among the vulgar.”⁸¹ In a statement that ironically underlines the multi-media nature of this type of ballad collecting, Scott urged Motherwell to “print it exactly as you have taken it down.”⁸² Nonetheless, despite Motherwell’s innovations, there are also telling continuities between his *history* of balladry and Percy’s “Essay.” Like Ritson and Scott, Motherwell adopted Percy’s model of a sixteenth-century confrontation between oral balladry and print commerce. He quoted Percy’s argument that the “old minstrels” were displaced by “a new race of ballad-writers,” and he later reiterated this thesis with a telling citation:

In the reign of Elizabeth and James the Sixth, the Minstrel ballads of England began to be superseded in vulgar affection by a more ambitious class of similar compositions, written purposely for the press, by sundry indefatigable small poets of that prolifick day. The chief balladmongers of said period have been enumerated by Percy and Ritson.⁸³

Like virtually all scholarly ballad collectors after Percy, Motherwell defined his collection in opposition to the “trash” of the print marketplace. Of the major archival collections of broadside ballads scrutinized by Percy and Ritson, he observed,

The editor regrets that he knows none of the collections now enumerated by personal inspection; but he believes that they contain few, very few, of what are the real ancient minstrel ballads of the country, and this opinion he forms from the great quantity of sad trash found in works whose materials are professedly derived from these sources.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1.4.

⁸¹ Motherwell, Letter to Scott, April 28, 1825, qtd. in McCarthy, “William Motherwell,” pp. 301–2.

⁸² Walter Scott, Letter of May 3, 1825, qtd. in McCarthy, “William Motherwell,” p. 303.

⁸³ Motherwell, “Introduction,” *Minstrelsy*, 1.24–5; 56.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1.58n.

But Motherwell was writing more than sixty years after Percy; as a working journalist, he knew that print commerce was here to stay. The nineteenth-century literary marketplace was now flooded with ballad collections whose editors *all* professed worthwhile motives. Accordingly, Motherwell warned that modern editors, in their well-intentioned zeal, could be a force for the *destruction* rather than preservation of ballads:

The tear and wear of three centuries will do less mischief to the text of an old ballad among the vulgar, than one short hour will effect, if in the possession of some sprightly and accomplished editor of the present day, who may choose to impose on himself the thankless and uncalled-for-labour of piecing and patching up its imperfections, polishing its asperities ... and of trimming it from top to toe with tailor-like fastidiousness and nicety, so as to be made fit for the press.⁸⁵

While it would be possible to see this type of extensive rewriting as artistic *production* rather than *destruction* (a new mode of adapting ballads to make them “suitable to every Occasion”), Motherwell rejected such a view. He suggested that the exigencies of the literary marketplace almost literally “tear and wear” “oral song.”⁸⁶ The editor looking to please “the tastes of the many” undermined the true value of ballads by polishing their language. Cataloguing previous collections, he concluded with a crushing review of Allan Cunningham’s *Songs of Scotland* (1826). Expressing outrage that a fellow Scot should have allowed the “humours of ... [the] market” to determine his editorial practice, he accused Cunningham of “hacking, and hewing, and breaking the joints of ancient and traditionary song” by rewriting ballads to suit “popular” tastes. Rather than valuing the unique characteristics of “oral song,” Cunningham had catered to the “gross body of mere song-readers” (my emphasis).⁸⁷ But the duty of a serious collector, Motherwell urged, was to print all significant variants exactly as they were sung. Contrasting his own editorial practice with Cunningham’s, Motherwell stated that the songs in *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* had been “printed precisely in the form in which they were remembered by the several individuals who sung or recited them.”⁸⁸ In a phrase we will return to in a moment, he asserted that these songs had been “printed as they orally exist.”⁸⁹

Motherwell’s editorial practices greatly influenced Francis James Child, who zealously worked to minimize what he viewed as the “distorting” effects of print on the orally-circulating songs he now explicitly categorized as traditional or “popular” ballads. Child described his own earliest collection, *The English and Scottish Ballads* (8 vols; 1857–8), as containing “all but two or three of the *ancient*

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1.5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1.5.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.124–6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1.132.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1.6.

ballads of England and Scotland, and nearly all those ballads which, in either country, have been gathered from oral tradition—whether ancient or not.”⁹⁰ Child published this collection as part of a commercial reprint series. While he included many broadside ballads that may never have circulated in “oral tradition,” he suggested that he had done so only to please his publishers: “as many ballads of this second class have been admitted as it was thought might be wished for, perhaps I should say tolerated, by the ‘benevolent reader’.”⁹¹ For the next ten years he apologized to the Danish ballad scholar Svend Grundtvig for having had to make this collection “tolerably saleable” to a general readership. He vowed, “I shall make no concession to such a consideration in the [collection] which I hope to make.”⁹² In a letter to Grundtvig, he echoed Percy’s disdain for broadside ballads, describing both the Roxburghe and the Pepys Collections as “veritable dung-hills, in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel.”⁹³ Child knew that many of the broadside ballads he consulted were older than the oral variants he had collected. But as Mary Ellen Brown observes, “he implies that the broadsides were later, corrupting the popular, orally transmitted version.”⁹⁴ Over the course of his career, Child would forge a sharp conceptual distinction between “traditional,” or orally circulating, ballads (which he favored) and “vulgar” broadside ballads (which he largely disdained). In his widely-cited essay on “Ballad Poetry” (1874), Child echoed ballad scholars from Percy onwards in suggesting that the Elizabethan institutionalization of commercial printing was a key factor in the displacement of earlier oral traditions. But in Child’s version of this now-familiar narrative, an earlier “displacement” model of oral minstrelsy versus print balladry evolved into a powerful classificatory (and evaluative) distinction between traditional and broadside ballads:

The vulgar ballads of our day, the “broadsides” which were printed in such huge numbers in England and elsewhere in the sixteenth century or later, belong to a different genus; they are products of a low kind of *art*, and most of them are, from a literary point of view, thoroughly despicable and worthless.⁹⁵

In Child’s schema, broadside ballads are not simply a *medium* of balladry; rather, they differ in kind from oral ballads. Furthermore, according to Child’s classifications, many of the same broadside ballads that Ritson described as the “favourite compositions of the vulgar” were no longer to be seen as “popular” ballads. Child famously redefined “traditional” or “popular” ballads in such a way

⁹⁰ Child, “Preface,” *English and Scottish Ballads* (Boston, 2nd edition 1860), 1.vii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.viii.

⁹² Child, Letter to Grundtvig, Aug. 25, 1872, rpt. in Hustvedt, *Ballad Books*, pp. 252–5; 255.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁹⁴ See Brown’s essay in this volume p.67.

⁹⁵ Child, “Ballad Poetry,” p. 218.

as to assert their fundamental incompatibility with "book-culture" and the art of printing. True "popular" ballads, he proposed, were those which had circulated in oral tradition and indeed, typically originated under sociocultural conditions no longer extant in literate society: "the condition of society in which a truly national popular poetry appears . . . is a condition in which the people are not divided by political organization and book-culture into markedly distinct classes." But "increased civilization, and especially the introduction of book-culture," undermined this national unity. The "popular" ballad, once a common inheritance, was abandoned by literate elites and fell to "the people in the lower sense." In early modern Europe, he suggested, "the art of printing" was a powerful force for the disintegration of communal traditions: "the diffusion of knowledge and the stimulation of thought through the art of printing . . . broke up the national unity." Media developments triggered correlating social, political, and cultural effects. For the oral tradition of balladry, the introduction of "book-culture" had tragic consequences: "the educated classes took a direction of their own, and left what had been a common treasure, to the people in the lower sense, the ignorant or unschooled mass."⁹⁶

But Motherwell's impassioned call for "collections of [traditionary] ballads, printed as they orally exist," foregrounds the practical difficulty and conceptual contradiction of positing an "oral tradition" of balladry that is separable from print, then attempting to preserve this "orality" through a different medium. Today, scholars routinely note the impossibility of eliminating the "distorting" effects of print on ballads, and many also note that print may have done as much to preserve "oral tradition" as to destroy it. But as I hope to have shown, our modern secularized concept of "oral tradition" is itself inseparable from the spread of print. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ballad scholars' heightened reflection on the spread of print arguably triggered the *new* idea that valuable ballad traditions were innately *oral*. Historicizing the concept of "oral tradition" helps us to see that it was only at a particular moment in the history of ballad collecting that print began to be imagined both as threatening ballads *and* as potentially saving them from being lost. Dugaw is certainly correct that "all facets of [the ballad] tradition—commercial and non-commercial, written, printed, and oral—need to be thoroughly investigated and represented."⁹⁷ But we also need to understand how ballad scholars contributed to the construction of these conceptual separations in the first place. Ballads are *not* separable from print, but neither, paradoxically, is the very conceptual framework through which we now understand the "orality" of ballads.

For early ballad scholars, defining balladry as a fit object of genteel or professional study meant separating "worthwhile" oral practices from "vulgar" or subversive ones. These gentlemen's constructions of "oral tradition" bore an antithetical relationship not only to print commerce but also to what we might call

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 214-15.

⁹⁷ Dugaw, "Anglo-American Folksong," p. 103.

“popular oral culture.” Genteel collectors excluded entire categories of popular ballads from their collections. Topical political ballads, for instance, are almost never included in their collections, for these so-called “ephemeral” productions, with their irreverent and often subversive viewpoints, were not part of the legacy these gentlemen saw fit to preserve. Today, persons interested in the history of balladry need to be alert to the ways that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century constructions of “oral tradition” have shaped our own assumptions about the actual diverse oral practices of balladry. We especially need to be wary of models that associate valuable “popular” practices of balladry solely with stasis or the past and adaptive, urban, and/or printed ballad traditions with “contamination” and decay. In eighteenth-century Britain, scholarly models of “oral tradition” were themselves a product of heightened reflection on (and nervousness about) the spread of print. As Mary Ellen Brown urges, we need a “catholic perspective on the ballad ... whether performed at a given moment ... or circulated in cheap print ... popularity need not be limited to the oral.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ See Brown’s essay in this volume, p.72.