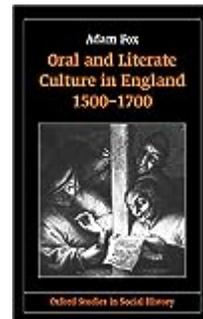




Adam Fox. *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiv + 497 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820512-8.



Reviewed by David Cressy (Department of History, The Ohio State University)

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Interpenetration and Infusion of Words and Text

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In a volume crammed with useful references, Adam Fox shows convincingly that oral, scribal and printed forms of communication were woven closely together in the culture of early modern England. He cites a wide range of evidence from archival and printed sources to demonstrate both the promiscuous migration of words and texts among media and the reciprocities between oral and literate realms. Indeed, he reminds us, we should not think of separate realms or domains but rather of “a dynamic continuum, each feeding in and out of each other to the development and nourishment of both” (p. 50). The point is repeated several times over, in elegant and interesting variations of phrase, that the three media of speech, script, and print interacted with each other in myriad webs of interpenetration and mutual infusion. This is a solidly crafted piece of work, deeply researched and skillfully written.

The strength of the book lies in its command of a variety of genres, modes, and media of communication. Even those forms most associated with the common people are shown to have been touched by text and affected by print.

Songs, for example, were crafted and adapted, performed and remembered, collected and transcribed, printed and published, bought and sold, so that neither singers nor hearers could know their true provenance or full chain of transmission. Popular rhymes and work-songs, tales and legends, migrated and transmogrified in and out of print, defying any distinction between oral and literate culture. Even speech itself could be imprinted by text, with more loan words entering the English language between 1570 and 1630 than at any time before or since. A fascinating chapter traces regional and social variations in the spoken language, and shows how speech could be rendered scribally in court cases and collected and corrected in print.

Apparently ageless utterances from the core of popular culture are traced to Erasmus’s *Adages* and back to classical literature. Proverbial wisdom reappeared in popular and scholarly forms. Folk aphorisms and country quips made their way through school exercises and manuscript commonplace books into printed compendia, and then back into popular oral circulation. Fables, folklore, nursery rhymes, and old wives’ tales similarly circu-

lated back and forth across media, between oral and literate culture. Most of the divination practices and superstitious lore interpreted by Victorian folklorists as remnants of unadulterated popular antiquities in fact derived from, and fed into the dynamic world of text. The oral culture of the early modern period was not replaced or subjugated, but reinforced and renewed by cheap and popular print. Citing tales and memories of local heroes, from King Arthur to Robin Hood, Fox recognizes “a sense of learned fiction feeding into popular lore” (p. 227). Though he does not cite Hobsbawm and Ranger on *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1984) he shares their sense of the present appropriating and remaking the past.

One important chapter uses Exchequer equity depositions in cases concerning boundaries, rights, and manorial privileges to show how oral testimony became part of the written legal record. Customary law was mutable and fluid, but the needs of lawyers and clients gave scribal fixity to the process of recollection. Similarly, the necessity for claimants in Star Chamber to cite the words of libellous rhymes that attacked their character preserved these most ephemeral of texts for posterity. Adam Fox is at his best in retrieving and rehearsing the libels, pasquils, and squibs through which humble parishioners mocked or disgraced their betters. He shows that literacy was no requirement, illiteracy no barrier, to the crafting and transmission of satiric or scatological verse. Through careful reconstruction of Star Chamber records he illuminates the circumstances of their composition, performance, and initial reception. As words that became texts, with both verbal and scribal forms, they solidify his case for the interpenetration of oral and literate cultures.

Thankfully, this book makes no reference to the “public sphere.” There is no theoretical debt, not even a note or a nod, to the Habermasian notions that have worked their way into recent studies of early modern communications and political culture. But there is abundant evidence, in this deeply researched study, of the vitality and ubiquity of politicized public conversation that drew on both oral and literate traditions. Long before coffee-houses first appeared in the mid-seventeenth century, English men and women could get their news, and contribute their views, in a variety of public and semi-public locales, including “taverns, ordinaries, inns, bowling-greens and alleys, ale-houses, tobacco-shops, highways and water passages,” to quote the artisan author John Taylor’s *Wit and Mirth* of 1626. Anyone interested in popular discursive practices will find dozens of examples of people meeting, reading, writing, and talking in *Oral and Literate Culture*.

This book is more successful in evoking a world of mixed oral and literate culture than showing it in transition. Fox cites examples from different periods, even different centuries, as if they are equally illustrative of his point. His history is more synchronic than diachronic. A discussion of pronunciation and speech patterns, for example, moves unproblematically from 1714 back to 1540. Remarks about pedlars and chapmen blend evidence from the reigns of Elizabeth I and Charles II. A paragraph analyzing the spread of news cites material from 1536, 1606, and 1690. Yet, as this book makes clear, significant changes took place that affected cultural transmission. Refinement of elite taste and sensibilities, the cultivation of politeness, and the increased dominance of London, drove rustic and metropolitan cultures further apart. The rise of professional journalism, the commercialization of printing, the development of a postal service, and the proliferation of coffee shops, transformed the milieu of reading, writing, and public discourse. Fox does not foreground these issues, but he provides valuable material that shows how far removed was the world of the later Stuart England from the age of the Tudors.

Fox insists repeatedly that there was no antithesis between oral and literate forms of communication, no barrier between literacy and illiteracy. There was no “crude binary opposition” between oral and literate culture, no “great cleavage” between literacy and illiteracy, no “crude dichotomies” of oral and literate communication. But who today thinks there was? Citing somewhat elderly sources, and sometimes no sources at all, he asserts that “it is still quite common for historians to regard certain sections of the labouring population as being essentially cut off from the written word” (p. 8). Fox attacks “the long-held impression that the majority of people, especially in rural areas, had only oblique contact with the written word either in manuscript or print” (p. 408). He challenges “long-cherished views” that the unlettered lived without reference to the printed word, and he refutes “the notion that writing necessarily destroys memory and undermines oral tradition” (p. 242). But this is tilting at straw men. Over twenty years ago I observed that “the world of print and oral culture were not entirely separate, and in fact there was a constant feeding from one to the other” (David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge, 1980, p. 14). Discussing “the culture of speech and action” and “the culture of print and script” in an essay published in 1983, I argued that “the two worlds interacted, mingled, merged. It would

be wrong to think of a strict dichotomy.”(David Cressy, “The Environment for Literacy,” in *Literacy in Historical Perspective*, ed. Daniel P. Resnick, Washington, 1983, p. 33). Fox presents abundant documentation in support of this view.

Quantitative social history has been out of fashion for several academic generations, so it is not surprising that Adam Fox makes no attempt to calibrate or count his findings by asking such questions as “how many?,” or “how much?” He believes, no doubt correctly, that the transition from the medieval to the early modern era saw an “increase in the ability to read throughout the lay population” (p. 13), and he accepts that there was a “selective distribution of literacy skills” (p. 47) in the hierarchical society of early modern England. But he is dismissive of past attempts to measure, to gauge, to stratify or trace these indicators over time, especially those based on counts of marks and signatures. Fox argues with Keith Thomas that statistics from such sources are no reliable guide to reading ability, an argument with which most compilers of such statistics would agree. The figures in *Literacy and the Social Order*, for example, were never presented as measures of the ability to read, for which there is still no reliable information, but rather as data about personal inscription on documents that was universal, standard, and direct. The primary debate to which they contributed was about social structure, not communications media, and they emerged from an historical practice more influenced by empirical sociology than the cultural turn. Readers may judge whether those tabulations remain robust, as markers of socially differentiated attainment and of gendered, geographical, and temporal variation.

Quantitative considerations matter little to Fox because he sees the entirety of English culture permeated and affected by writing. He acknowledges that “many

could not read” (p. 36), but does not find such people disadvantaged. He cites, for example, an Elizabethan mayor of Chester who could neither write nor read (p. 22), a Dorset husbandman in 1603 who “could not himself read” (p. 313), and a London bricklayer in 1677 who “could neither read nor write” (p. 401). He quotes Richard Baxter’s late seventeenth-century remark on the danger posed to “knowledge and religion” by “the tinkers, sowgawters and crate carriers and beggars and bargemen and all the rabble that cannot read” (p. 346). But he does not draw these examples together or raise the possibility that illiteracy might have been widespread. All these people were drawn into the literate world, which impinged upon them and shaped their culture, whether or not they possessed particular variegated skills of reading or writing.

I would like to offer the following example of the vulnerability associated with illiteracy in a legal and economic system increasingly reliant on paper. It comes from the Quarter Sessions records of Cheshire, where Richard Higginson, yeoman, of Aston-iuxta-Sutton, told the court in January 1642 that Edward Leadbetter owed him twenty-seven shillings and that he had “notes” for the payment thereof. He was cheated of his money, so Higginson claimed, when one of Leadbetter’s friends took the notes to read, “and knowing this examine could not read, delivered him two other papers which did neither concern this examine nor the business.” Richard Higginson was immersed in a world of paper transactions, gave oral testimony to a court of record, and signed his complaint with a cross (Cheshire Record Office, Quarter Sessions Rolls, QJF/71/1, f. 27). Twenty years ago Richard Higginson might have been counted among that substantial one third of mid-Stuart yeomen judged illiterate because they did not write their names. Now, perhaps, he should be seen as someone telling a story.

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