

Thomas Cohen and Lesley Twomey (ed.), *Spoken Word and Social Practice. Orality in Europe (1400–1700)* (Medieval and Renaissance Authors and Texts, 14). Leiden and Boston: Brill 2015. XV + 499 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-28868-3. € 168.00.

At first sight, it may seem an odd choice to review this volume in *The Medieval Low Countries*. This is not so much because it deals with the whole of Western Europe in late medieval and early modern times, for the Low Countries were part of this wide geographical area. The topics dealt with, 'Witches' Words', 'Words on Trial', 'Preaching the Word', 'Word on the Street', 'Gossip and Gossipers', and 'Prayer, Teaching, and Religious Talk', all can be and have been studied for the late medieval Low Countries, even if sometimes other parts of Western Europe seem to have benefited more from scholarly attention. That the Low Countries are at the centre of attention in only one contribution, by Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, is therefore no problem. What might be a problem, however, are the characteristics of 'orality' as discussed by the editors in their introduction, for, if 'orality' is determined by 'situatedness' (p. 12) and an 'attachment to persons and their dealings' (p. 14), one may wonder whether knowledge about ideas on witchcraft in seventeenth-century Norway or about the meaning of gossip in sixteenth-century Venice is really helpful in studying similar knowledge in, say, the late medieval Low Countries. The situation there may well have been different, and the forms of what Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy* (1982) called 'the psychodynamics of orality' may well have been mutually incomprehensible.

The editors' 'Introduction' suggests how this problem might be overcome. Cohen and Twomey distinguish between orality and its characteristics in general, which ought to be valid irrespective of time and place, and the kinds of orality that can be observed in late medieval and early modern Europe. They see the objective of the contributions to *Spoken Word and Social Practice* as an attempt 'to get behind the screen of writing to rediscover the vanished world of speech', and, at the same time, to trace 'the workings of those speech habits, as they shaped writing at a time in European history when, far more than today, the realm of script echoed with the arts and attitudes of a vast world of talk' (p. 1). The editors do not provide a definition of orality, but one can deduce from these words that they are thinking primarily of 'speech' as opposed to 'writing'. Later on, they explain some of the differences between these two modes of communication. They talk about the much wider 'bandwidth' of orality, of the ways speech is understood by 'a nearly-infinite variety of deliveries of even a single sentence' (p. 9), to which the gestures of the speaker add even more variability, whereas, as Michael J. Braddick mentions in his

'Afterword', the 'projection of an image' by the speaker (p. 454), to assist his credibility and authority (e.g., by his way of dressing), influences the way the recipient of the spoken words interprets the speaker's intended meaning. Most of this is addressed by the editors when they consider the general characteristics of orality. They happily adduce arguments taken from their own personal, twenty-first-century experience, next to arguments taken from studies of other times and places. This can be helpful, but it leads to problems when, at the same time, we are enjoined to consider the time, place, and circumstances of instances of oral communication in late medieval and early modern times as different, as having a specificity all their own. For when they descend from the general to the particularities of orality in the period under consideration, they do notice differences. We are both literate and living in societies in which orality is still important; they were living in a period when print was still frail. Even in 1700 print was still scarce. Words still had weight.

The problem, of course, is how can we know this? It is very well to state that it is one task of the scholar 'to turn to the written record, and to its supplements, to ferret out the nature of speech itself', and another 'to quiz literary sources, asking them how much they still bear marks of the world of speech' (p. 24). Unfortunately, in explaining how to do this, they come up with standard approaches developed to study epic poetry, which have since been discussed, re-evaluated and, more often than not, dismissed. In the study of the orality of libels, songs, and poems circulating in the late medieval cities of the Low Countries, heraldic metaphors and political prophecies, and the political plays staged in those same cities, these standard approaches are of very little use.

Dumolyn and Haemers are understandably hesitant to draw conclusions about orality in general. They are mainly interested in subversive uses of the oral and written word, and seem to restrict orality to what was orally and publicly performed in urban societies that were 'both strongly oral and very literate' (p. 284). Whether subversive thought was expressed on paper or spoken is a secondary matter. They do point out how the use of slogans, heraldic metaphors, and rhyme schemes could assist easy remembrance and oral transmission, but notice that this would work in writing and print as well. Whether these characteristics of the texts they studied were common to late medieval and early modern orality is not a question they care to consider. They study the 'public voice' of subordinate groups to get to know the beliefs of those who had been considered, wrongly, as it turns out, the 'historically inarticulate' (pp. 298–99).

The editors are much more interested in reconstructing what was actually said on the basis of written texts than are Dumolyn and Haemers. In

his 'Afterword' Braddick, too, mentions as one of the main difficulties in studying orality how to get access 'to what was actually said' (p. 447). Considering the fundamental differences between speech and writing enumerated in the 'Introduction', one might come to the conclusion that the search for what was actually said – including all the different ways the words might have been pronounced, the gestures used, and the non-verbal forms of communication grasped, if not always correctly, by speakers and auditors alike – is an impossible demand. No written text ever attempted to do justice to all the audible and visible differences between speakers and auditors. At best, some indications can be found in written texts about a selection of characteristics that apparently made sense to these texts' authors. This selectivity was not restricted to literate behaviour either, for it is highly unlikely that speakers would have been consciously aware of everything that might 'massage' the message. There was always a chance that a message was misunderstood, either in spoken, written, or printed form. We ask too much of the authors of written texts when we require of them objective registrations of speech of a kind that even nowadays is impossible to provide, despite the technology at our disposal. Even the reduced 'bandwidth' of written texts remains beyond the modern possibilities of making the text known electronically. How does one register the sweet fragrance of the leaves of a manuscript of the Quran? Digitising the manuscript is not the answer, and yet it is unlikely that this sweet fragrance was without its influence on the way the words of the Quran were perceived. Just as medieval historiographical works are nowadays studied not so much for the elusive facts 'just as they happened', but rather for the ideas of what contemporaries thought possible or fit to have happened, so can the alleged reportage of 'what was actually said' rarely offer more to the scholar than ideas of what might or ought to have been said.

The continuing search for what was actually said has marred the study of the sources of medieval and early modern orality for decades. The questions that are raised by this volume – and there are many of them – are similarly familiar to those who have followed research in this field over the past generation. Is there a way out of reiterating the same questions over and over again? Maybe the article by Dumolyn and Haemers shows the way forward by avoiding the use of orality (often in silent opposition to literacy), and to concentrate on how, with oral, written, or printed forms of communication, people tried to accomplish the various things they were concerned about: witchcraft and magic, justice, getting their point across in a court of law, in church, or on the streets, by gossip, prayer, and seduction. This volume provides excellent case studies that may lead to

further research of other regions, at other times, and among other sets of people. In this way, one does indeed have a chance of finding out more about the ways people expressed themselves, even if the exact words they used will continue to elude us.

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