Sounding Imperial

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In the middle of a transition toward a fully developed literary marketplace from early modern notions of patronage and coterie circulation, eighteenth-century authors transformed and renegotiated their role in society. While the eighteenth century was not the first historical period to grapple with the effects of print on models of authorship—printing presses had existed in England since 1476—it was at this time that the widespread diffusion of printed texts seems to have necessitated a renewed examination of what it meant to be an author. Amongst this chaotic, rapidly changing social and economic situation, old literary questions were revisited: What constitutes an author’s voice? Are authors and their voices the same? Do texts speak in voices? The answers to these questions about voice were twofold: first, the changing social dynamics between authors and readers that resulted from a growing literary marketplace altered authors’ attitudes toward the virtual voices of the printed text; second, in response to these social and economic changes, authors experimented with different ways to represent oral voices on the printed page.

In the early eighteenth century, a confluence of factors spurred this reconsideration of the ideas of authorship, voice, and the print marketplace. As Paula McDowell has recently noted, the eighteenth century was a turning point in the construction of what we now call print culture.¹ This turning point was closely linked with the mid-eighteenth-century revaluation of oral tradition, but it was also motivated by widespread economic shifts in print capitalism and changes in the nature of literacy and readership. Legislative circumstances, such as the lapse in 1695 of the Licensing Act, which had allowed preprint censorship of
written works, and the abandonment of legal restrictions on the number of printing presses in England, led to increases in production of printed materials. More texts were being printed, exceeding an earlier high mark achieved during the 1640s during the political tumult of the English Civil War. The print trade evolved into a marketplace industry, more motivated than ever before by competition among booksellers for the growing number of buyers. Increases in the forms of and venues for reading—journals and newspapers, pamphlets, posters, ballad broadsides; lending libraries, reading societies—meant that printed matter was more accessible than ever before. The spread of print drove social changes in the nature of reading; rather than focusing intensively on a few works, like the Bible, readers increasingly acquired and used a larger number of texts.

One of the most powerful received narratives of literary criticism and cultural history is that with diffusion of print came a concomitant anxiety on the part of authors about exposure and alienation. Such a response suggests that authors closely identified with their printed productions. The withering of the amateur-patronage system and the rise of professional authorship established a new “ethos of productivity” motivated by the more rigid separation of authors and readers, making authors into producers and readers into consumers of commodified literature. The result was the idea that printing a text always involves some level of technical alienation: sending a text out into the world as print means detaching it from its author. Michael McKeon notes that printing is “an act of depersonalization that abstracts both author and reader from the concrete presence of face-to-face exchange.” Contra Derrida, he argues that eighteenth-century authors felt print to be a potentially depersonalizing act, unlike the more familiar intimacy of oral conversation and manuscript exchange. At the same time, print publication required not just the separation of the text from its author but also the circulation of oneself in the form of the text. A printed text was considered an extension of its author, whose person could be closely associated with the perceived qualities of the text. As Mark Rose elaborates, by the eighteenth century the literary work was “above all the objectification of personality. The commodity that changed hands when a bookseller purchased a manuscript or a reader purchased a book was thus personality no less than ink or paper.” The notion that print exposed authors, making them physically vulnerable, was a common fear, yet the impersonality of wide publication permitted authors to reach thousands of unknown readers in a way that is impossible for the localized techniques of spoken communication.

This potential contradiction affected the concept of poetic voice and textual persona that had thus far informed eighteenth-century texts. Before the advent
of sound reproduction, writing—especially print—extended the human voice beyond the physical constraints of the body. In this way, print would seem to be another version of what Shaftesbury describes as one action of philosophy, to hold “us out a kind of vocal Looking-Glass, draw sound from our Breast, and instruct us to personate our-selves.”8 The poetic voice, then, is a kind of impersonation: the recreation of a virtual person in text, speaking to the reader. We might see Shaftesbury’s Soliloquy not just as a philosophical argument but quite literally as advice to authors trying to survive and succeed in the world of modern media in which their personae can circulate widely.

In order to capture the immediacy associated with orality, authors realized that they needed to experiment with textuality. The effects of these innovations have been of exceptionally long duration. Despite the repeated (if varying) claims of New Criticism and post-structuralism that whatever we do as readers, we should not equate the author and the text, the controversies examined in this book were motivated by readers’ expectations about the authenticity of the text and the link between an author and its speakers. Eighteenth-century readers, like modern ones, were apt to think of an author as all of the voices in a text. Yet, as print culture intensified during the eighteenth century, authors increasingly sought new ways to “personate” themselves in texts, with correspondingly innovative and catastrophic consequences.

In this chapter, I reexamine the career of Thomas Gray to explore these fraught issues of print circulation and poetic voice. Gray is typically seen as a gentleman-poet, a retiring scholar anxious to avoid the trials of the literary marketplace. His career has always been seen as pivoting around his enormously popular “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard” (1751), which established him as the most widely respected poet of his era. Supposedly the antithesis of his contemporary Samuel Johnson, who famously quipped that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,” Gray has been portrayed as a relic of an earlier time, longing for a more intimate and friendly public sphere and anxious about printing his poetic works for payment.9

I argue that Gray, in addition to being this enticingly contradictory literary figure—a popular poet who nonetheless seems to have disdained publicity—was also the origin of an experimental tradition that sought to use elements and modes adapted from idealized eighteenth-century notions of oral performance as a way to reform the literary marketplace. This experiment operated in two interrelated ways. Gray approximated in his poetry some of the formal characteristics of oral culture in order to foster a sense of immediacy between himself and his readers. Yet, by inventing (and textualizing) a printed voice—an oral
voice that enunciates (and is audible) as print—Gray simultaneously took advantage of the possibilities for a wider audience that the dissemination of printed texts offered him. Both “The Bard” and Gray’s later imitations of Welsh and Scandinavian folk traditions from the 1760s use complex formal and editorial strategies to suggest the sense of vocal presence associated with oral performance. These literary techniques and editorial strategies constitute a poetics of printed voice.\textsuperscript{10}

This experimental tradition is unlike the prolific, market-dominating masculine persona of an author like Johnson, yet it is no less deeply engaged with print. Gray’s poetics of printed voice, rather than avoiding the literary marketplace, mark a concerted attempt to reformulate its operation. In place of a distanced, alienating model of authorship, based on the notion that texts circulate virtual versions of their authors, Gray attempted to substitute the immediacy of bardic performance as (paradoxically) channeled through the printed text, much as William Collins did in his Highlands Ode. Moving through Gray’s career, from the “Elegy” to his imitations (from 1751 until the late 1760s) we can detect this evolving poetics. Gray’s later poetry, often passed over by literary critics, was a direct response to the popularity of his “Elegy” and reveals a search for inventive notions of authorial personae and audience effect in an increasingly complicated printed world. The crucial difference between Gray and his early eighteenth-century predecessors like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift is that Gray explored how to adapt the idealized immediacy of oral voices in ways that they would have found vulgar. So, rather than turn away from the supposedly frightening popularity of the “Elegy,” Gray’s later poetry revisits and extends the textual mechanics of representing voice that the “Elegy” initially raises.

**AUTHORING GRAY’S “ELEGY”**

Three related poems illustrate the consequences of the shifts in modern printed authorship that motivated Gray’s desire to reform the print marketplace: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s and Lord Hervey’s *Verses Address’d to the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace* (1733); Pope’s *An Epistle from Mr. Pope, to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), which serves as a belated response to Montagu’s poem; and Swift’s *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.* (1738). All three of these poems explore the axis of body–voice–person in early-eighteenth-century poetry. Since at least two of these poems circulated in manuscript among smaller groups of friends and allies before they were made available in print, they show the degree to which print intensifies the dangers of disseminating oneself in the form of a
text. For example, *Verses Address’d to the Imitator of... Horace* (1733), which directly attacks Pope and his writing, is generally attributed to Montagu and Hervey, a courtier and memoirist, although the *Verses* were published anonymously and authorship was identified only as “By a Lady.”¹¹ This anonymity offered a safe haven to the poem’s authors while mitigating the personal cost of their potential exposure to public critique.¹² Montagu and Hervey, motivated by their long-running feud with Pope, a former friend turned political opponent, consciously undermined the distinction between author and text to discredit Pope’s literary reputation and to assault his body. As part of their verbal assault, Montagu insists that Pope’s poetry resembles his body and its deformities. In Montagu’s description of Pope, as Helen Deutsch argues, he “becomes a thing both written and written upon.”¹³ Pope was a hunchback, approximately four-and-a-half feet tall and by many accounts sexually impotent as a result of an illness he suffered as a child.¹⁴ Montagu insists that no one could ever love such a physical freak:

But how should’st thou by Beauty’s Force be mov’d,
No more for loving made, than to be lov’d?
It was the Equity of Righteous Heav’n,
That such as Soul to such a Form was giv’n

(lines 48–52)

Pope and his texts are one and the same—the “Soul” given “Form”; the body made deformed. His verse cannot help but repeat those deformities, making it, like him, a “wretched little carcass” (70) and an “angry little Monster” (76). Readers can know that Pope’s poetry is vulgar, Montagu implies, simply by looking at his person; alternately, his texts must be monstrous because they are the expressions of a contorted body. Montagu’s dual focus on his body and the body of his texts exemplifies a cultural situation sensitive to writers’ anxieties about print’s ability to expose someone’s body to literary and literal assault. Because his texts are like his body—monstrous and deformed—to assail his texts is to harm his body. Thus, Montagu crafted a poem that subverts the protections offered by earlier notions of poetic speaker and persona by insisting that in Pope’s case printed text and human body are indistinguishable, regardless of who speaks in the poem.

Pope’s responses to Montagu’s assaults show that he, too, manipulated the continuum between his texts, his body, and his poetic voice. In the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, he twists those deformities that Montagu satirizes into the embodiment of literary virtuosity. In response to his detractors, he asks rhetorically:
Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
Dipt me in ink, my parents or my own?
As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisp’d in numbers, for the numbers came.15

Pope disarms the attack upon his writing by dipping himself in ink, by making himself into the components of poetry: his blood is ink and his body the “lisp’d . . . numbers” he has spoken since childhood. The connection between the highly ordered couplets of Pope’s poetry and his “indelibly marked” body, Deutsch asserts, is an expression of the “cultural imagination of authorship at a transitional moment” in the British “profession of letters.”16 If poetic voices and personae are virtual projections of an author, then Pope employed a strategy of bodily exposure in a cunning attempt to control the public representation of his personality as it circulated through polite culture in a textual form.17 Pope’s putting forward of his deformed body in his writing exemplifies the strategy, taken up by other poets during the eighteenth century, of manipulating the presentation of poetic voice and speaker for self-authorization and self-possession.

Swift adopted a similar approach in his Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift.18 Like the Epistle to Arbuthnot, Swift’s poem has an extensive autobiographical component. In the course of his poem, Swift makes himself dead, conducts a postmortem, and examines his life through the voices of other characters. The proliferation of voices in his poem is a proleptic attempt to control his literary reputation for posterity. At one point, objectifying himself, Swift imagines himself as a commodity in the bookshops of London, bound to be forgotten: “One Year is past; a different Scene; / No further mention of the Dean” (lines 245–46). In another episode, he voices his physicians as they conduct an autopsy on his body. After cutting him open, they pronounce satisfactorily that “all his Vital Parts were sound” (176). Swift’s savage humor at the “sound” dead body is a comment on the alignment of the commodity and the author’s person in the marketplace. If authors become their books, and voices are like their persons, then Swift’s description of himself as a forgotten text or an autopsied body (with perfectly functioning organs) articulates a slight alteration to Pope’s technique of exposing himself as a means of garnering the sympathy of his readers.

This manipulation is strongly evident in the lengthy final scene of the poem, when Swift asks his reader to

Suppose me dead; and then suppose
A Club assembled at the Rose;
Where from Discourse of this and that,
I grow the subject of their Chat:
And, while they toss my Name about,
With Favour some, and some without;
One quite indifferent in the Cause,
My Character impartial draws:

(299–306)

What follows is an elaborate, flattering description of Swift as a politically independent, honorable man who “never Courted Men in Station” (325) and “bore continual Persecution” (400) from those more petty than he. This utterly self-aggrandizing voice is anything but impartial. It is Swift as he would like his readers to remember him. By making himself into many virtual voices, he creates a flatteringly multiperspectival poetic posterity that is difficult to dispute. These tactics allow Swift to speak as someone else, to adopt an “impartial” persona with whom to enumerate his enormous virtues. Print allows him to preserve this characterization and circulate it among an audience that does not know him but will, no doubt, readily pronounce their opinion of him once he is dead. By making himself dead, Swift beats them to the punch and takes up all the different voices, affirmative and negative, on his life before anyone else has the opportunity to do so. Swift knows that death, like being in print, means losing control of one’s person; using structures of voice and persona, he regains some sense of self-possession. That he resorted to poetic self-murder and resurrection as an impartial voice demonstrates the measures needed to control one’s reputation in a media world that circulates bodies in the form of texts.

These three poems share an interest in textuality’s ability to project an author’s presence. Voice, in this case, becomes shorthand for the intricate techniques by which authors make themselves virtual in a text. It also provides a type of prophylaxis against the very real effects that can rebound upon the body of authors because of their writing. Gray’s “Elegy” is symptomatic of these shifting notions about poetic voice and authorial identity. Gray often felt the same anxieties as other writers did about print’s ability to expose authors to unknowing and distant publics. Throughout his life, he carefully controlled what and when he published, because he understood print’s ability to put his reputation at the disposal of others. He often imagined the literary marketplace as an assault; for instance, he refused an attempt by his publisher to print an engraving of his face on a collection of his poems, writing grimly that he would not “suffer my Head to be printed” as he thought it would be worse than the “Pillory.” At another point in his career, he expressed disapproval of readers who complained
about his poetry but still “bought me . . . & put me in their pocket,” referring to collections of his poems (Corr., 2: 532). Like Swift, who worried that his verse, “when printed and published, is like a common Whore, whom any body may purchase for half a crown,” Gray was concerned that printing his poetry meant that anyone had access to his body for the right amount of money.

Gray resisted the potential for readers to buy or possess his person by making his poetry more impersonal as his career progressed. Before its publication in 1751, the “Elegy” went through a series of revisions. Initial drafts of the “Elegy” were shorter and had a single first-person speaker. While revising, Gray shifted his use of pronouns so that it became more difficult for crucial lines to be read as the voice of the poem’s first-person speaker. He lengthened the poem substantially by including new characters (the “hoary-headed swain”) and generic frames (the poem’s final epitaph). The hoary-headed swain and the epitaph mark important turns in the development of the poem, because the potentially autobiographical first-person speaker is withdrawn. The multiplication of speakers occludes any sense that there is a single subjectivity behind the pronouncements of the poem which could be aligned with Gray, much as Swift did in writing his Verses. The personal becomes more impersonal as other characters overwhelm the poem’s first-person speaker.

More recently, scholars have focused on what they perceive as the antagonism between oral and literate modes in the poem’s revisions, the residues of which are evident in the poem. There is the famously “mute inglorious Milton,” who was never able to speak, and the “unlettered muse,” who presumably inspired the “rude forefathers” of the hamlet. Oral modes are accentuated by the inclusion of the hoary-headed swain, who tells tales about the rural village, rather than writing poems, like Gray. The epitaph is printed in italics, distinguishing it from the rest of the poem. Quite often during the early eighteenth century, italics were used to indicate speech, as readers of Daniel Defoe’s novels will recall. However, in the “Elegy,” italics indicate the shift from the orality of the speaker and the hoary-headed swain to the engraved epitaph on the tombstone. The shift in modes—from aural discourse to silent reading of written words—is marked by the shift to italic type. Expressing this media shift as a change in typeface is one experimental aspect manifested in the “Elegy.”

For John Guillory, these characteristics indicate the poem’s interest in the “cultural capital” of vernacular literacy, against both the knowledge of classical antiquity and the traditional oral storytelling that had dominated early modern culture. The “Elegy,” in short, narrates what was changing in eighteenth-century British culture. In this reading, the poem is about what creates the con-
ditions for speech, and it is therefore also an elegy for the intimate, face-to-face relationships of orality against the backdrop of a would-be Milton who has been made “mute” by rural poverty and illiteracy.\(^{23}\) For other scholars, the real mourning of the “Elegy” is for the presumably noncommodified relations between singer and listener found in oral storytelling. Gray, wary of print publication, composed a poem that longs for a simpler cultural era.\(^{24}\)

These analyses are helpful to the degree that they show Gray engaging with oral modes as a way to assess the consequences of print publication. But these portrayals of storytelling in the poem, rather than revealing Gray’s disdain for print publication, in fact indicate the beginning of his career-long reconsideration of what it means to be a published author. He appeals to oral culture, not to eulogize it, but to discover how to make print imitate it. This might be demonstrated most clearly in Gray’s reaction to the printing of the “Elegy.” Gray sent the manuscript of the poem to Horace Walpole, who circulated it among select members of London society. But Walpole distributed it so widely that it was discovered and about to be published by the *Magazine of Magazines*, a new and relatively unknown journal. Gray was furious and quickly brought out an authorized edition of the poem with a more reputable publisher. Although published anonymously, the work was widely reprinted and attributed to him very soon thereafter. Following the successful reception, Gray thanked Walpole, joking that Walpole had acted as the poem’s “father,” with Robert Dodsley, his printer, serving as the “nurse” at the poem’s birth. And, despite the rapidity of publication, Gray told Dodsley that he hoped his poem would have the “best Paper and Character” (*Corr.*, 2: 341; Feb. 11, 1751). The poet saw the “Elegy” as his infant—it was a poem that had come from his body. Like a parent, he followed its travels through the world, assiduously noting on a copy of the poem the different locations where it was subsequently reprinted.\(^{25}\) Throughout his life, Gray was meticulous about how his works appeared in print. Understanding his poems to be extensions of his body led him to control precisely how that body was manifested. Yet, in this instance, Gray saw the parturition of his text as requiring the efforts of at least two other men, Dodsley and Walpole, giving the “Elegy” quite a queer birth. One interpretation of this situation may regard Gray as the mother of this poem and its voices; given recent scholarship on Gray, however, I am tempted to read it also as a metaphor for the collaborative nature of printed voice. That Gray included his printer as part of the poem’s creation and Walpole as part of its pre- and post-print circulation shows his sensitivity to the many factors involved in bringing a text to public view. And, by figuring the birth of his printed voice as a collaboration among men, Gray ran counter to the typical
alignment of the authentic singular self with poetic voice that would begin to prevail at the beginning of the nineteenth century.26

Gray’s consideration of these aspects of publishing imply that he was not necessarily a retiring gentleman-poet uninterested in public presentation of his works. Such attention to the details of publication belies the general assumption (which, admittedly, he himself cultivated) that he was indifferent to the publication of his work. Uncomfortable with the virtual elements of modern authorship, Gray, rather than retreating from publication, engaged it on his own terms, by depersonalizing his poems and proliferating their speakers (and, as I have suggested, their authors and creators). Voice becomes a strategy for displacement and for self-containment. Therefore, the “mute inglorious Milton,” the storytelling “hoary-headed swain,” and the heroized village elders are not added to the final version of the “Elegy” to replicate some nostalgic oral past. These speakers—representatives of oral traditions—are an alternate future for print. Gray’s revisions of the “Elegy” resulted from the attempt to manage his public exposure in print and led him to devise new models of the author-reader relationship that imitated and evoked the immediacy of storytelling and oral performance.

PERFORMING GRAY’S “ELEGY”

In a treatise from 1806 called *Chironomia*, which takes Gray’s “Elegy” as a central example, the rhetorician Gilbert Austin presents a system of notation that he claims allows readers to “record and to communicate in writing . . . the various requisites for perfect rhetorical delivery.”27 Austin marked up the “Elegy” with notes that instruct readers how to modulate their voice, position their feet, and move their hands, arms, and head as they recite the poem. These notations are a version of the oral future of the printed “Elegy” that Gray himself might not have been able to imagine. An amateur chemist accustomed to publishing papers with the Royal Society of London, Austin used tables and diagrams to systematize the representation of spoken voices in a poem already filled with printed ones.28 To twenty-first-century readers his textual annotations and emendations might look arcane and chaotic. Nonetheless, they raise important practical and epistemological questions about how best to represent the spoken voice on the printed page. Austin’s version of the “Elegy” blooms with letters, numbers, italicized marks, lines and accents, above and below the text, particularly in the first three stanzas, in an attempt to convey the immediacy of oral performance (Fig. 3). Ironically, Austin’s method increases the amount of printed text, requiring readers to refer to tables and diagrams to decipher his some-
Figure 3. Gilbert Austin’s rhetorical notation of the first three stanzas of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard” (1806). Courtesy of the British Library Board (11805.i.18).
times counterintuitive system. The added detail overwhelms the poem, making it almost unreadable.

Austin encourages readers to convert his notations into an actual oral performance, matching the text with a gesturing body and a living voice. The notes for the stanzas shown here indicate that readers or performers should slowly step forward and then return to their original positions, all the while swinging their arms in front of them, pointing toward the horizon, before ultimately lowering their arms to their sides. The connection between the plot of Gray’s poem and the action of the performance is explicit: as the sun “leaves the world to darkness and to me,” reciters’ hands fall to their sides, following the sun’s descent. Simultaneously, performers turn their heads toward the audience, “listening” to the cowbells as the herd returns home. Performers’ voices and bodies imitate and enact the details of Gray’s poem. Gestures dramatize and narrate the poem’s setting and events. The goal of these actions, Austin claims, is to communicate emotions: “impassioned compositions delivered with proper feeling and expression open . . . to the view of the hearer the internal operations of the speaker’s mind.” But which speaker? The oral performance could express the emotions of the oral performer. Or it could invoke the speakers in Gray’s text—the first-person narrator and the hoary-headed swain—whose feelings can be definitively sensed only when the poem is dramatized aloud. Regardless, it is not clear whose mind speaks when the performer recites Gray’s “Elegy” according to Austin’s system.

In his attempt to rationalize how printed texts can record and represent the physical actions of the body and the modulation of the voice, Austin offers few clues about the effect of performance upon the status of the printed text.

Austin’s approach is closely linked with the elocution movement, an enormously important cultural development in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world. For elocutionists, who, like Austin, adopted a scientized approach to oratory, rhetoric was a means of inciting and influencing the passions. In The Art of Speaking (1761), James Burgh declares that good oratory should be almost coercive in its power. “Like irresistible beauty,” he claims, it should transport the speaker; “it ravishes, it commands the admiration of all, who are within its reach . . . . the hearer finds himself . . . unable to resist . . . . His passions are no longer his own. The orator has taken possession of them.” This breathless description makes oratory into a contest of wills, in which the speaker needs to invade and take control of the listener’s body in a way that would seem to Pope or Gray a familiar danger. Thomas Sheridan, the most important elocutionist of the eighteenth century, agreed with Burgh, lamenting, “[O]ur greatest men have been trying to do that with the pen, which can only be performed by the tongue; to
produce effects by the dead letter, which can never be produced but by the living voice, with its accompaniments.” Sheridan presumably fought the “dead letter” not just by improving public speaking but by preserving the unique character of spoken communication. For Sheridan and Burgh, the goal of oratory was to excite the passions and reenergize the body through the living voice. Of course, like Austin, both of Burgh and Sheridan argued for the advantages of their own systems in printed treatises.

These rhetorical systems and oratorical philosophies led to practical methods of marking up the written and printed text so as to retrieve the “living” voice. Thomas Jefferson composed a copy of the Declaration of Independence that included accents (single and double quotation marks) that seem to indicate different reading speeds and the length of pauses after words. Jefferson’s friend Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to the dictionary-maker Noah Webster, proposed that printers reform their presentation of texts to make speaking them easier. In one example, he suggested that printers place question marks at the beginning rather than the end of sentences, so that readers could anticipate the need to inflect their reading voices. The British rhetorician Joshua Steele developed a scheme for transcribing the prosody of a text; based on a musical scale, it attempts to answer how we speak texts’ voices. Steele used symbols to explain the different tones and gradations of voice, and his diagrams illustrate the system (Fig. 4). Consider his markings upon a well-known couplet from John Denham’s 1642 poem Cooper’s Hill (Fig. 5).

Figure 4. The central elements of rhetorician Joshua Steele’s notation system for the performed voice, from An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech . . . (1775). Courtesy of the British Library Board (RB.23.b.3187).
Of course, there are many ways to interpret these excerpts. One might see Steele’s version as simply a reprinting of Denham’s poem: a quotation. Another reading might interpret the markings as a poem that has been annotated with alien-looking runic symbols. Yet another interpretation might understand them as an inadvertent form of visual poetry, perhaps akin to George Herbert’s pattern poem “Easter Wings” (1633). Regardless, while seeking to explain an animate aural text, Steele created his own densely visual one. His system possesses its own aesthetics of the printed voice, even though it claims only to explicate another’s artistic object. Steele, Jefferson, and Austin, in their attempts to adapt a literate form for oral voices, created idiosyncratic, visually rich printed artifacts.

A related set of ways to edit speaking voices on the printed page is found in the investigations of modern anthropologists. Over the past thirty years, anthropologists have debated the best way to represent oral storytelling. They share with eighteenth-century rhetoricians the desire to create the correct editorial form with which to communicate the spoken word. After his studies of Zuni performances, Dennis Tedlock wrote, “[I]f the notation of the audible text of a storytelling event is to provide a performable text, it will have to follow a path between the conventions handed down in literate tradition and the purely hypothetical goal of total notation.” To interpret properly the traditional oral performances, Tedlock says, anthropologists must invent an “open text,” a text that “forces . . . the reading eye to consider whether the peculiarities of audible sentences and audible lines might be good speaking rather than bad writing.” Tedlock proposes that texts create the “possibility of a further performance,” achieved by a system that uses the variability and sophistication of typography as one way to encode an oral performance: “small or light type” for soft sounds, “large or bold type” for loud ones, and white space for silence. Tedlock’s “open text” is the literary and editorial equivalent of the spoken performance, and it is necessary, he argues, to record correctly the oral knowledge of traditional cultures.
As we read a “performable text,” whether it is Austin’s version of the Gray’s “Elegy” or Tedlock’s Zuni folk traditions, we are asked to determine if it is “good speaking.” While Tedlock admits that completely notating a text is “hypothetical,” he asserts that the goal of these systems is to return oral poetry to participation, since “an oral poetics that begins with living oral traditions is by its nature participatory.” The anthropologist Johannes Fabian likewise seeks to “document performances” in ways that allow them to be “re-oralized.” These documents would demand a “capacity to reenact or recreate the oral performance that is the source of the text.” The text itself would be like a set of signs, Fabian argues, that match with a “voice through which the text will take on a body—an audible body,” because “oralization, that is, recourse to audible speech, actual or imagined, is an essential part of our ability to read texts.”

Tedlock and Fabian share an interest in capturing, recording textually, and reperforming the aural elements of performance in ways that are shockingly similar to the eighteenth-century experiments of Austin and Steele, which also sought to return texts to a spoken voice. Yet Tedlock and Fabian, like Austin and Steele, neglect to account for the ideological dimensions of literary forms. In attempting to understand the interaction between the oral and written texts, we must be careful not to fetishize performance, so that it seems rooted in an authenticity that precedes aesthetic or cultural forms. As Eileen Julien notes, it is necessary to reveal the ideological role of aesthetic decisions and the aesthetic aspects of ideology—that is, the cultural form that ideology takes. The attempt to encode and to re-oralize will always lead to a gap between the performance and the text. Julien suggests that, rather than trying to find the orality in a work as a way to bridge this gap, we turn our attention to the text’s use of orality as a metaphor for its own form. The necessary point of investigation is at the intersection of the formal and ideological—unraveling what Julien calls the “polyvalent symbol” of oral performance by exploring how it serves specific imaginative and aesthetic ends, in this case, of eighteenth-century poetry and its evolving representation of oral voices in the printed text. The search for a visual form of the “living voice” has proven extraordinarily productive of new literary forms, even if the attempt to create a perfect printed equivalent for oral performance is by definition impossible.

**IMPERSO NATING THE BARD?**

How did Thomas Gray use print to frame the speakers of his later poetry? After the “Elegy,” Gray sharpened his appeals to oral voices to construct alternate
models of the relationship between authors and readers. Like Austin, Steele, and modern anthropologists, Gray explored alternate ways of editing the oral voice. In his later poems, orality serves as both a metaphor and a concrete structuring mechanism for the poetic voice. But, rather than portraying a version of rural village storytelling, as he does in his “Elegy,” Gray turned to a different kind of oral performance: that of medieval Welsh bards and of Scandinavian folktales.

Arguing that Gray intervened in the literary marketplace by appealing to an idealized oral performance might seem counterintuitive, since orality is often believed to be the antithesis of print. Recent critics have argued that Gray’s interest in bards and oral cultures stemmed from his uneasiness with the professional authorship and public acclaim that accompanied the success of the “Elegy.” Linda Zionkowski states that by embracing older models of authorship Gray was attempting to “recreate a pre-commercial past” as an alternative to the print marketplace. Suvir Kaul describes Gray’s attraction to Welsh and Scandinavian bards as an attempt to portray the “disenfranchised eighteenth-century poet ventriloquizing the voice of ancient cultural empowerment, finding in a feudal poetics a nostalgic celebration of bardic potency.” Imagining bards as secure, empowered, and respected poets supposedly eased the difficulty of negotiating between the desire for public literary authority and the aversion to market demands, concerns common to Gray’s earlier poems, such as the “Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West” (1742) and the “Elegy.”

These accounts of Gray’s relationship to oral culture do not explain why he, in allegedly trying to recreate a “feudal poetics” or revive a “pre-commercial past,” repeatedly relied on commercial publication. Secure in a fellowship at Cambridge University, Gray did not publish for money. Uninterested in party politics and dismissive of courtly favors, he did not publish for patronage. If the goal of his later poetry was to escape the fetters of print by reverting to the inherently nonliterate relationship between performer and listener that made oral culture so attractive, why did Gray persist in publishing poetry at all after the “Elegy”? I suggest that in his sweeping ode “The Bard” and in his later imitations of Welsh and Scandinavian oral poetry, such as “The Fatal Sisters” and “The Triumphs of Owen. A Fragment,” Gray was extending the initial explorations of print-mediated orality which he made in the “Elegy” by positioning himself as an editor and translator of bardic voices. For “The Bard,” he developed an array of typographical and literary techniques with which to make print seem to speak with the same passion and wildness that he saw in Welsh bardic singing.
He experimented with ways to textualize the face-to-face intimacy of an oral performance, setting it against the alienation of professional authorship for pay and the circulation of the self in the literary marketplace.

After the public reacted negatively to esoteric elements of “The Bard,” Gray modified his approach to printed voice. Whereas the Welsh voices in “The Bard” are internally qualified by a verse narrator, the bardic voices of Gray’s imitations are presented on their own, framed by a series of paratextual prefaces and annotations. These paratexts, by discriminating between Gray’s editorial voice and the imitations’ speakers, establish the opportunity—and the textual space—for bardic voices to appear without the kind of internal framing that exists in “The Bard.” With his imitations, Gray created a literary form that he believed allowed the reader to experience unadulterated bardic voices. Although most scholars view Gray’s later poems as retreating into nostalgia for medieval modes of cultural authority or as simply appropriating the authenticity of marginalized figures, I suggest that he turned to oral cultures as a way to construct a poetic voice that would speak powerfully to particular audiences, as he felt bards once did, while simultaneously transcending the physical constraints of space and time in a way that can only be achieved through print.

“The Bard” revives a tale—suspected then and subsequently disproved—that the thirteenth-century English king Edward I executed all the bards while invading Wales. In Gray’s poem, the last living Welsh bard alone confronts Edward’s oncoming army. This poem, started in the early 1750s but not completed until 1757, signaled an important shift in Gray’s career, and it encouraged his contemporary authors to attend to the ancient ballads, folk songs, and runic poetry of traditional Scottish, Welsh, and Irish cultures. A short explanation of the poem he penned in one of his commonplace books makes clear that the poem experiments with representing bardic voice. Gray asserts that in the poem the bard calls out to Edward with a “voice more than human . . . and with prophetic spirit declares, that all his cruelty shall never extinguish the noble ardour of poetic genius in the island . . . and that men shall never be wanting . . . boldly [to] censure tyranny and oppression.” The description of the bard censuring tyranny in a superhuman voice constructs a complex political allegory that connects Welsh resistance to English incursion with the preservation of Britain’s poetic genius. By resisting the English invaders, the Welsh bards are portrayed as defending their political independence and their indigenous culture, the two essential attributes, in Gray’s opinion, of poetic vibrancy. The poem establishes a link between liberty and verse that is secured by the bard. But even as the bard calls out to condemn the English king, his speech is acknowledged to be futile.
By representing the final utterances and, ultimately, death of the last Welsh bard, Gray allegorizes, in a single tragic instant, the more gradual dissolution of the historical conditions that maintained bards as speakers firmly ensconced within the political structure.

Gray’s ambivalent attitude toward the bards of this poem results from a desire for the public authority that he believed Welsh bards once possessed.\textsuperscript{52} It is widely accepted that Gray identified with the last Welsh bard. This popular scholarly interpretation originates in a statement attributed to Norton Nicholls, who recalled Gray’s saying, toward the end of his life, “I felt myself the Bard” while he was composing the poem.\textsuperscript{53} Some scholars have read in this statement evidence of a liberating moment in Gray’s authorial evolution—the successful discovery of character and persona.\textsuperscript{54} Others have seen his identification with the Bard as the failure of his poetic voice after the “Elegy.”\textsuperscript{55} Still others have argued that Gray’s fantasy was part of a larger tendency of eighteenth-century English authors to “impersonate” bards and thus appropriate their voices imperialistically without respecting their specific cultural significance.\textsuperscript{56}

However, when placed within the context of mid-eighteenth-century experiments with the idealized oral performance, it becomes clear that for Gray the figure of the bard signified an immediacy that printed poetry should aspire to, not an authentic voice that could compensate for the collapse of his own. No instance better illustrates the realignment of author and reader that Gray hoped printed voice could accomplish than his description of his encounter with John Parry (1710?–1782), a Welsh musician who was popularly known as the “blind harper.” At that time, Gray had lost interest in his draft of the “The Bard,” but after hearing Parry play and sing, he felt inspired to complete the poem. Born in Wales, Parry was supported for the majority of his life by a prominent Welsh family, but he lived in London and performed what he called “Antient Welsh airs” throughout England, where he was received as living confirmation of the existence of Welsh oral traditions.\textsuperscript{57} In 1757 Parry traveled to Cambridge, where Gray heard him. Gray reacted ecstatically to the performance, gushing in one letter that Parry “scratch’d out such ravishing blind Harmony, such tunes of a thousand year old with names enough to choak you, as have set all this learned body a’dancing” (\textit{Corr.}, 2: 502).\textsuperscript{58} Although Gray probably exaggerated when he described the songs as “thousand year old” tunes, he was clearly inspired by the way Parry’s voice recalled historically distant Welsh art forms. He believed that through Parry’s songs one could hear the past. Such a performance offered Gray an example of poetry that was embodied and immediate, and it suggested to him a model for his ideal reading audience. Parry satisfied his listeners by
providing them with a conception of Welsh history while pleasing their senses. For Gray, this pleasure translated into renewed interest in “The Bard”; he comments approvingly in a letter that Parry’s performance has set his poem—and its emergent poetics of printed voice—“in motion again” (Corr., 2: 502).

Parry was not the only source for Gray’s depiction of the Welsh bard, nor was Gray’s imagination of this figure derived exclusively from Celtic sources. Gray claimed, for instance, that his models for the last bard also included Raphael’s portrayal of God in Vision of Ezekiel (1518), and he later added that Parmigianino’s fresco in Italy’s Santa Maria della Stecata of Moses breaking the tablets was even “nearer to [his] meaning” than Raphael’s painting. In both of these artworks Gray was attracted to the central figure’s wild, uncouth looks—unruly hair, flowing beard—but one cannot discount their statuesque bodies, characteristic of Italian Renaissance painting. Perhaps most importantly, considering that Gray chose to compose “The Bard” as a modified Pindaric ode, both paintings represent biblical scenes of prophets. Abraham Cowley, who revived the Pindaric ode for English literature during the seventeenth century, suggested a connection between the style of the prophets (“especially of Isaiah”) and Pindar when he argued that both “pass from one thing to another with almost invisible connexions, and are full of words and expressions of highest and boldest flights of Poetry.” Cowley’s emphasis upon poetic flight accords with Raphael’s depiction of God floating effortlessly among his heavenly host in Vision of Ezekiel, and Gray’s interest in height and elevation, poetic and otherwise, is evident in his setting “The Bard” on Mount Snowdon, a dominant landmark and the highest point in Wales. Gray’s imagination of the bardic figure, therefore, is not wholly Celtic in the way that has been often assumed. In fact, he created his own idiosyncratic image of the bard and affirmed Welsh oral culture by associating it with Greek poetry, the Bible, and Renaissance painting. Gray hoped to emphasize the kind of poetic effects, such as the elevated tone and flights, that Cowley described as occurring in Pindar, which Raphael depicted in his painting and which Gray felt while hearing Parry sing, as much as he hoped to capture the authenticity of cultural situatedness that, scholars argue, bards signified at this historical moment.

WILDNESS AND WELSH PROSODY

The authority and poetic elevation that Gray grants bardic performance has little similarity to “the still small voice of Poetry,” which he had claimed years earlier was not meant to be “heard in a crowd.” Gray’s faith in poetry’s ability to
reach an audience was shaken in 1748 when Dodsley compiled and published *Collection of Poems. By Several Hands*, which included poems from Gray.\(^6^1\) Although Gray had been writing verse for years, his verse had not been published before, and he professed himself to be “ashamed” to see his work in print (Corr., 1: 295). His shame derived from the feeling that his poetic voice, like that of his contemporaries and unlike those of bards, was weak and inaudible. Gray’s belief that printed publications might no longer reach their appropriate audience only exacerbated this sense of poetry’s weakness.

This sense of shame and vulnerability is absent from “The Bard,” particularly from the confident, exclamatory address of its first line: “‘Ruin seize thee, ruthless King!’\(^6^2\) Although the poem opens with the Bard’s voice in quotation marks, the identities of speaker and audience remain uncertain until the middle of the stanza. The speaker’s anonymity makes it possible for his voice to invoke the collective power of “Cambria’s curse,” an effect which intensifies the stridency of the speech. From the outset the Bard’s voice is prophetic, oracular, and accusatory, and Gray’s description grants it a heightened poetic power not unlike the “highest and boldest” poetic flights that Cowley sees both in Pindar and the Bible. As the Bard’s “sounds” spill down upon Edward they seem to take on a life of their own, confronting the English army and scattering “wild dismay” over Edward’s “crest’d pride.” And as the poem proceeds, the importance of bardic voice only becomes more pronounced. Except for a single, quick utterance from one English captain (who simply says “To Arms!” [14]) and the brief narration of the initial two stanzas and final two lines, the poem is cast in the voices of Welsh bards.

The collective presence implied by “Cambria’s curse” takes on a new form near the middle of the poem. As in the “Elegy,” the poem’s voices multiply when the last living Welsh bard is joined by some of his executed companions, who have returned from the dead to avenge themselves upon their English oppressors. These ghostly bards’ voices merge with that of the primary speaker, forming a supernatural choir whose intensified sound and dire predictions are described as “dreadful harmony”:

‘No more I weep. They do not sleep,
‘On yonder cliffs, a griesly band,
‘I see them sit, they linger yet,
‘Avengers of their native land:
‘With me in dreadful harmony they join
‘And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line.’

\((43–48)\)
Using slant rhyme and internal rhyme Gray reproduces the double cadence that he claimed was central to Welsh oral poetry.\textsuperscript{63} This cadence—reflected in the combination of repeated sounds and caesurae in the lines “No more I weep. They do not sleep” (43) and “I see them sit, they linger yet” (45)—amplifies the bardic harmony referred to above. “Double cadence,” Gray wrote in his commonplace book, arises from the “regular return of similar letters or syllables in the beginning or middle of a Verse,” a technique he found “very pleasing” for the listener.\textsuperscript{64} The natural melodies of oral poetry not only accentuate pleasure but also “assist the memory” by being both harmonious and strongly repeated throughout the composition, he recorded.\textsuperscript{65} Although Gray relied on the systematic musicality and cultural function of Welsh verse, he also insisted that the Welsh had not reduced its “harmony” to a rule but had continued to “[practice] it wildly & without art.”\textsuperscript{66}

With his depiction of Welsh voices, Gray also traded on eighteenth-century perceptions that contrasted Welsh barbarism with English civility. The fantasy of a “wild Wales” endured into the nineteenth century and was confirmed by early travel writers like Thomas Pennant.\textsuperscript{67} In a version of the climatological and topographical approaches that characterized so much thinking about race, ethnicity, and nation in the eighteenth century, the Welsh were seen as a product of the rough uncultivated terrain.\textsuperscript{68} The Welsh language was dismissed as an obvious sign of the barbarity of the place; in his 1682 \textit{Wallography}, a treatise on Wales, the English author William Richards describes Welsh speech as a “native \textit{Gibberish}” that revealed the ignorance of the Welsh and the desolation of their culture.\textsuperscript{69} This same feeling struck the anonymous author of \textit{A Trip to North-Wales}, who claims that crossing into Wales was like reaching “\textit{America}, or the most uninhabited parts of Arabia.”\textsuperscript{70} Gray hoped that the adaptation of Welsh verse would infuse “The Bard” with this atmosphere of wildness. Rather than seeing Welsh verse as culturally defunct gibberish, Gray discovered in its musical prosody and oral mnemonics a version of Parry’s “thousand year old” tunes and an ability to recall history. “The Bard” has the capacity to arouse the reader’s senses while tantalizing the imagination because Welsh prosody is both “very pleasing” and evocative of Welsh history. By simulating the resonance of Welsh oral poetry, Gray constructed a printed voice that transcends the limitations he believed made contemporary English verse unable to be heard and remembered.
What follows the Bard’s invocation of his deceased brethren is an elaborate history, imagined in the temporality of the poem as a prophecy, recounting the tragedies of England until the ascension of the Tudors, who are seen as restoring native British rule to the island. To the bardic chorus, Edward and his descendants represent illegitimate political power, unlike the “long-lost Arthur” (109) and the other “genuine kings” (110) of Britain’s past. The chorus creates an opposition between Edward’s genealogy (“line”), which they have cursed with their song, and the line of genuine monarchs that preceded Edward and that he violently usurped. The chorus celebrates these “genuine Kings” as “Britannia’s Issue” (110), an image that reinforces their legitimacy over Edward’s bloody line. In this sense, “The Bard” combats Edward, and the political and aesthetic contamination that he represents, not only with prophetic voice but with a poetic line that, like the bardic chorus, weaves the unfortunate fate of Edward and his descendants into a spoken curse. The form of the poem and its power to curse Edward are one and the same: the Bard’s prophecy—itsel interwoven through the use of alliteration—is in fact English history, which Gray and his readers already know has come to pass.

Gray’s awareness of rhythm and meter and of their ability to aid memory and communicate to listeners and readers becomes explicitly thematized at those moments when he combines the poem’s “double cadence” with the trope of weaving: the bards exclaim that they “weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line” (48), and later that they “[w]eave the warp and weave the woof” (49) of their prophecy. These references to weaving, particularly weaving “lines,” echo the alliteration and “double cadence” of the poem. The repetition of sounds interlaces individual lines, creating a verbal texture that is unified with the poem’s subject matter—weaving occurs both in form and in content. It was Gray’s research into Welsh prosody that led him to revive the use of alliteration, an unpopular literary device among eighteenth-century poets. Samuel Johnson declared that the use of alliteration in “The Bard” was “below the grandeur of a poem that endeavors at sublimity.”71 Johnson, whose skepticism about oral traditions is well known, overlooked the fact that Gray’s metrical experiments were part of an effort to recall aural forms and to facilitate a sense of connection that was like the one between performer and listener. In a print culture that Gray perceived to be increasingly dominated by authors vulnerable to being misread, the intimacy made possible by textualizing a methodical yet presumably artless verse form structured through oral
mnemonics must have seemed an exciting alternative to the alienation typical of printed poetry.

The similarity of bardic song, lineal genealogy, and the lines of the poem expresses the particular kind of power that Gray collects by recasting the events of English history as the not-yet-enacted elements of prophecy. The unusual temporality of “The Bard”—where English history is transformed retroactively into Welsh prophecy—grants the Bard a power that is accentuated by contemporary readers’ collective acceptance of the history that he tells. In an odd way, then, Gray places the Bard in a position to recognize another “line”: the line of poets that make up England’s literary inheritance. The Bard states:

‘A Voice, as of the Cherub-Choir,’
‘Gales from blooming Eden bear;
‘And distant warblings lessen on my ear,
‘That lost in long futurity expire.

(131–34)

The Bard’s song in this passage prefigures the declining state of the English poetic tradition, which is depicted as lost, like a voice stretched to the greatest extent of its audibility. In a footnote to a later edition of this poem, Gray makes it clear that the cherubic voice that “gales” from “blooming Eden” is John Milton’s, the “distant warblings” are the “long succession of poets” following him, and the “ear” that hears these voices belongs to the Bard. Gray remarks that he did not intend his image of poetry’s silence in “long futurity” to indicate that “[p]oetry in Britain was some time or other really to expire.” He claims instead only to have meant that “it was lost from his [the Bard’s] ear from the immense distance” (Corr., 2: 504). “The Bard” thus attempts to spatialize temporality, much as is done in the “Ode on the Distant Prospect of Eton College” (1742). But, rather than looking into the past through memory, as in the Eton College Ode, the Bard listens to the future, finding that his hearing begins to fail after Milton’s voice. This transforms prophecy from a vision to be seen into a song to be heard, emanating from the future back into the past, which the Welsh bards in turn re-vocalize to Edward and his English army (as well as to Gray’s contemporary readers). Although Gray states that he did not want to suggest that English poetry was going to “expire,” by positioning the Bard as an auditor of English authors’ voices, he implicitly suggests that they are less audible—in other words, less memorable—than their predecessors, like Milton. The collective bards’ prophecy thus comments on English poetry from a position outside of (and before) it.
The distinction between the relative audibility of English and Welsh and past and present voices is rendered even more precisely through the poem’s formal properties. Rhetorical structure and typography differentiate the voices of “The Bard” and provide a guide, in tandem with point of view and stanza form, to their relative status and the relationships among them. Gray uses quotation marks to delineate the speakers of the poem—the verse narrator, the last Welsh bard, and the bardic chorus. He uses single quotation marks for the Bard’s voice and double quotation marks for the chorus, adding a single inverted comma to indicate the presence of extra voices (compare Figs. 6 and 7). This typographical change signals not only a transition between voices but also an integration of human and ghostly voices and an intensification of the resulting song.

Figure 6. The first stanza of “The Bard” from 1757, when it was still titled simply “Ode II.” The use of quotation marks ceases as the voice of the verse narrator appears. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Don.d.3 [1], p. 13).
The highly self-conscious use of typography adds a material dimension to the voices of the poem and amplifies the idea that quotation marks disembode speech by representing it on the printed page and thus distinguishing it from the rest of the text. All voices in a printed text by definition are disembodied. Quotation differentiates the living bard’s voice and the bardic chorus, whose utterances are doubly disembodied by being both cited and ghostly. But Gray employs quotation marks to suggest the material presence of the Bard’s speech and the supernatural audibility of the choir. Since quotation marks were not mandatory for the duplication of someone else’s spoken or scripted words until the end of the eighteenth century, Gray’s use of varied quote marks is notable. As he composed his poem, there were no standard rules about the use of quote

Figure 7. The end of stanza I.iii and the beginning of stanza II.i of “The Bard.” Note that Gray shifts from single to double quotation marks as the single bard’s voice is joined by those of his compatriots to form the poem’s bardic chorus. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Don.d.3 [1], p. 15).
Before the eighteenth century, such marks were often used as a kind of pointer, alerting readers to important material. And, as in the case of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, single or double quotes could be a written signal to inflect speech or alter the pace of an oral recitation. Their best-known modern function, as an indicator of proprietary material, connecting certain words to particular authors or speakers and thus establishing those words as property, was still being worked out by literary culture in the eighteenth century.

These varying uses of quotation marks indicate what is at stake in the representations of voice found in “The Bard.” It is not just the printed form of the text at issue but the social understanding and political relationships that the form implies. That the verse narrator’s voice never appears in quotation, and thus in a sense remains unmarked—the basis from which the other voices of the poem should be distinguished—is crucially important to understanding Gray’s poem. After the Bard delivers the lengthy invective against Edward, the poem’s final two lines are pronounced by this unmarked speaker, who states: “He spoke, and headlong from the mountain’s height / Deep in the roaring tide he plunged to endless night” (143–44).

Most critics have focused on the Bard’s sudden suicide, but it is more significant that the poem concludes by reemphasizing what should already be obvious about the Bard: “He spoke.” The poem is a speech act attempting to accomplish a political result. Furthermore, the poem ends not with the Bard’s song but with the verse narrator’s description of his death. The past tense of the verse narrator’s voice differs from the present or future tenses of the bards’ voices, showing that the verse narrator is reflecting on the Bard’s actions after they have occurred. Gray considered a different ending for the poem that emphasized the cause of liberty, but ultimately he elected to place the verse narrator outside of the poem’s dramatic action and distended temporality, permitting him to frame the Bard’s enunciations in much the same way that the quotation marks do. Rather than impersonate or ventriloquize bardic speech, Gray qualifies these “wild” speakers, distancing them from their author yet simultaneously using them as a way to suggest the urgency of their voices, and thus the urgency of his poem.

Because print cannot take advantage of the obviously embodied, vocalized sounds of oral performance, eighteenth-century authors sought to devise techniques to simulate its presence. In reproducing the structures of Welsh prosody and experimenting with typography, Gray made poetic techniques, which are by definition disembodied, operate antithetically; that is, he made them evoke embodiment and immediacy. Quotation marks both disembodied the speech of
the poem’s speakers while also offering the sense that ghosts really can return to life and haunt the English with their sound. This attitude toward the revitalization of voice would prove extremely persuasive for Scottish and Anglo-Indian authors, who later readapted Gray’s experiment to their particular locations and politics. The ghostly voice would remain an effective means of political critique for the remainder of the eighteenth century.

(UN)EDITING THE BARDs

Few of Gray’s contemporary readers appreciated his attempt to textualize bardic voices, largely because the unusual typographical techniques he used and the metrical schemes were associated with marginalized locales like Wales and with lower-class dialects. Although Gray had hoped to make bardic voice present and audible to his readers, many of his contemporaries took issue with what they felt was the poem’s obscurity, a difficulty that they often ascribed to Gray’s inarticulateness or unintelligibility. Despite Gray’s attempts to reproduce a plausible English version of Welsh orality, for most English readers the result sounded a bit too much like “native gibberish.” On one occasion, after hearing Gray read his ode aloud, a member of the audience was reported to have leaned over to a companion and asked if Gray was speaking in English, complaining that he could not understand a single word. Another reviewer dismissed the line “weave the warp and weave the woof” (in other words, Gray’s approximation of Welsh metrics) as nothing more than “Spittle-fields poetry.” The Spitalfields area of London contained the majority of the English weaving industry and was densely populated with foreign immigrants, particularly Huguenots, most of whom spoke a type of French mixed with English phrases; as Maureen Waller writes, “in many of the streets of Spitalfields and Soho the immigrant population was so dense that it was rare to hear English spoken.” The jokes about Gray’s obscurity and the references to “Spittle-fields poetry” show that some readers, rather than being pleased by the peculiar verbal texture and wild speakers of the poem, instead associated them with the foreignness of Wales, the vulgarity of working-class labor, and the unintelligibility of immigrants’ French argot.

Gray reacted to these disparaging responses by questioning not his own articulateness or the form of his poetic voices but his readers’ intellectual abilities. Before he had even completed his *Odes by Mr. Gray*, the collection in which “The Bard” first appeared, he confessed that it might exclude many readers:
Gray was concerned that uneducated readers, whether men or women, would catch only a “florid expression” or a “musical rhyme”; that is, they would indulge in the immediate pleasures of orality and musicality without engaging the concomitant benefits of reason and learning. Interestingly, he expected that for educated readers Welsh metrics would impart a “wild spirit,” but for uneducated readers, he feared that it simply would sound like a “wild obscure unedifying jumble.” The wildness cultivated in “The Bard” was thus apparently meant to be coupled with the learning that Gray so often found lacking among English readers. Those with what Gray perceived to be a deficient education might misread, or actually mishear, the printed voice he devised in “The Bard.”

The motto that appears in Greek on the title page of Gray’s *Odes*, which Gray later translated as “vocal to the intelligent alone,” reinforces the sense that “The Bard” can only be understood by those readers who are well-versed in poetry and classical learning (*Corr.*, 2: 797). He admitted after the publication of his odes that he was surprised how few intelligent readers there were in England, insisting nonetheless that his “ambition terminated by that small circle” (*Corr.*, 2: 797). However, upon hearing that a noted Italian critic had read and enjoyed his odes, he felt proud that “my voice has reach’d the ear and apprehension of a Stranger distinguish’d as one of the best Judges in Europe” (*Corr.*, 2: 797). The figuration of voice in these two instances—as intelligible only to a select few yet able to traverse geographic boundaries and reach a distant, unknown reader’s “ear”—demonstrates Gray’s belief that the printed voice in “The Bard” could transcend the physical constraints of space and time but also speak powerfully to particular readers, in much the same way that the bardic voice in Parry’s songs affected Gray. It is a voice that mixes characteristics of both oral performance and printed dissemination, and the metaphors of audibility and intelligibility that Gray uses to describe this printed voice identify the type of audience and reaction that he imagined for his poems. The form of the poem finds its proper readers and discriminates among them.
Bruised by the popular responses to his Odes, Gray promised angrily that “the next thing I print shall be in Welch. that’s all” (Corr., 2: 524). Although Gray’s statement was undoubtedly meant to show some studied nonchalance about his public failure, in the next few years he partly fulfilled this promise by beginning a series of loose translations of Norse and Welsh oral poetry which he called “imitations.” Gray composed six imitations in total, though only three were published during his lifetime, in his 1768 Poems by Mr. Gray, which also included nearly all of his previously printed works.82

These imitations were initially inspired by research into ancient and medieval Celtic cultures that Gray undertook in 1759 at the British Museum. He intended them to appear in his widely anticipated but never completed History of English Poetry, as part of a record “as far back as can be traced” of the poetry of the “Galic (or Celtic) nations” (Corr., 3: 1123). Toward that end, the imitations use many of the rhetorical features (such as alliteration) that Gray thought originated with Celtic culture and that he began to explore in “The Bard.”83 Creating these imitations was linguistically complex; Gray worked primarily from Latin translations, though he referred to transcriptions in the original language, whether Norse or Welsh, to decipher the metrical and aural qualities of the verse.84 The fidelity of his technique varies widely. Sometimes he followed the Latin texts closely while at other times he departed from them or even added elements that do not appear in the originals or in the Latin. In calling these poems “imitations,” Gray both unveils and obscures his role in their composition: imitation was widely understood to be the loosest form of translation, in which the author could both assert his or her presence and cancel it at the same time.85

Taken together, these imitations raise questions about what it means to be a printed author whose poems try to resemble the setting and conditions of oral poetry. They represent another step in the experiment with printed voice which Gray started in the “Elegy.” In these imitations, he presents bardic voices on their own rather than mediated through a verse narrator. In part because of the confusion caused by “The Bard,” Gray framed the speakers of his imitations through prefaces and annotations that help make their voices intelligible by providing the kind of information that, Gray complained, many of his readers lacked. One imitation, for instance, is preceded by a two-page preface and another by an introduction that explains the voices and historical events presented in the poem. An overall “Advertisement,” which divides Gray’s imitations from the other works in Poems, describes their evolution from Latin transcriptions into English texts. Gray also composed explanatory notes for the imitations,
even if he claimed to have done so “out of spite.” The mediation of bardic voices, rather than being internalized within the rhetorical structure of the poem, as it is in “The Bard,” migrates out into the paratextual material that surrounds the individual imitations. The added prefatory matter not only distinguishes Gray’s imitations from his other poems but it also separates the editorial voice of the paratexts, which can be identified as Gray, from the bardic voices of these imitations. The proliferation of paratexts, together with Gray’s assertion that the imitations represent “specimens” of other nations’ poetic heritage, craft a posture of disinterestedness and self-displacement. The origin of these poems, Gray suggests, lies in another culture’s oral voices; his role as an editor and imitator is merely to present them to the reader.

Gray’s depiction of himself as an imitator of others’ initially oral compositions is intentionally simplified, of course, so as to convince the reader that they can actually hear bardic voices. He creates the opportunity for readers to imagine that they experience these voices coming through the text. For example, “The Fatal Sisters” recounts an Icelandic legend of twelve sisters (“twelve gigantic figures resembling women”) who sing while weaving human prophecies at their looms. The collective voice of the twelve women is never interrupted within the poem. Instead, their voices are framed through a detailed preface that narrates how the poem ostensibly was disseminated by a curious “native” who eavesdropped on their song. The poem turns dramatically in the penultimate stanza when the sisters address this male interlocutor. They sing:

Mortal, thou that hear’st the tale,
Learn the tenour of our song.
Scotland, thro’ each winding vale
Far and wide the notes prolong.

It is through this listener that the sisters’ song is “heard, learned, and perpetuated . . . and passes into the historical and cultural vocabulary of all of Scotland.” This type of mediation is supposedly an imaginative attempt on Gray’s part to contain the danger of powerful female voices, which are neutralized by the fact that the disseminator of their song is a man.

But the address to the male listener also fashions the poem’s prehistory in oral circulation. This self-reflexivity about oral dissemination does not appear in the Norse song or in the Latin transcription that Gray used to guide his imitation. The stanza is a versified instance of the scholarly tracing that Gray had hoped to accomplish in his aborted History of English Poetry. In actuality Gray did not so much search for the authentic origin of an oral tradition as he fabri-
cated it. By lodging the oral legend’s prehistory in an overhearing listener, he reduces, even obfuscates, his role in the composition of the poem. The extended transmission of which the sisters sing also distances him from his role as author. Most reviewers agreed, focusing upon the original documents and accepting Gray as merely a translator of them. The mediation of a male interlocutor, whether a listening “native” or Gray himself, is absorbed as a facet of the sisters’ prophecy. They predict not only the political and historical events that supply the content of the poem but also their song’s diffusion among the future inhabitants of Scotland. Thematizing the poem’s origin in oral tradition further legitimizes Gray’s decision about how to present the sisters’ voices as print, and his text becomes an extension of their command to disseminate their song “far and wide.”

Authorship also emerges as an issue in “The Triumphs of Owen,” which, complete with epic features such as epithets and kennings, presents the voice of a bard celebrating the achievements of Owen, a twelfth-century Welsh prince. Gray included a preface for this poem, although it is shorter and less detailed than that for “The Fatal Sisters.” Even though he knew this fragment was commonly attributed to the Welsh bard Gwalchmai, its speaker remains unnamed, creating a sense of anonymous collective voice, through which, presumably, this tale had survived and been transmitted. The absence of bibliographical detail suggests that Gray removed any marker of individual authorship, an action that accords with his choice to compose imitations in the first place. In “The Triumphs of Owen,” however, his consciousness about authorship and fragmentation has great significance, since this poem dramatizes its own uneasy transition from sung utterance to literate object. In the first line, its speaker states that “Owen’s praise demands my song,” but the title refers to it as a “fragment,” thereby highlighting its current, literary incarnation and Gray’s role as an editor rather than an author.

Gray’s figuration of himself as an editor and imitator of poems that ultimately originated in oral traditions is a crucial aspect of his printed voice after “The Bard.” By reproducing bardic voices without any overt authorial mediation, Gray forcefully distances himself from the voices on the page. What Katie Trumpener has called the “impersonation” of bardic voice in eighteenth-century poetry becomes increasingly impersonal as Gray’s experiment with printed voice shifts from the “The Bard” to the imitations. But Gray’s goal is not to decontextualize or fragment oral traditions and then absorb their authentic voices as his own, as Trumpener and some others have claimed. In fact, Gray’s printed voices answer the dilemma presented to early-eighteenth-century authors like...
Pope and Swift by offering bardic voices that can never be confused with his own. His versions of medieval bardic voice are unencumbered by interlocutors and narrators, at least within the body of the poem, thereby more effectively conjuring their oral cultural context. Gray intended this context, recreated within the bounded space of the printed imitation, to replace the sense of disconnection that he felt existed between modern authors and their readers with the sense of connection that bards and their audiences enjoyed during oral performances. Their voices travel through the text to the reader’s ears, much as Gray’s voice traveled to the Italian critic that he believed to be one of the best judges in Europe.

In the evolution of Gray’s printed poetic voice over his career we get an answer to the question of what might be the most efficacious literary form for preserving oral performances, an answer different from but related to those of eighteenth-century elocutionists and twentieth-century anthropologists. Although many scholars avoid Gray’s later poetry and consider his imitations anomalous, we misunderstand his ambition as an author if we see his later poems as merely products of a sadly fading literary power or as evidence of a withdrawal from the literary marketplace into simple nostalgia for medieval bardic culture. The ambiguous authorial stance of the imitations and the complex editorial practices and textual forms that Gray created show that he continued to experiment with print and poetic voice until the end of his career, a fact that should alter our sense of him as an alienated writer whose growing skepticism of the marketplace eventually led him to disengage from it.

Instead, Gray’s repeated and multifarious representations of bardic voices in print were an attempt to develop an alternative to the prevailing author-reader relationship that the print culture of mid-eighteenth-century Britain was creating. Performers like Parry, who in Gray’s mind was a modern-day bard, exemplified to him the desirable relationship to audience. Parry’s performance was communal, immediate, and embodied, and Gray hoped to approximate these characteristics in his printed texts as a way to counter his sense of being disconnected from his readers. While Gray’s invocations of bardic figures had important political ramifications, for him these ramifications had as much to do with the perception that Celticism preserved political liberty, and thus guaranteed artistic vibrancy, as they did with the notion that he helped expand eighteenth-century British imperialism into a new colonial aesthetics. Gray’s adoption of the bard does not necessarily imply thoughtless appropriation of a marginalized culture’s more authentic voice or sense of place. His image of the bard originated not only in Celticism but also in Renaissance paintings and the Bible. A
critical emphasis upon Gray’s role in the appropriation of marginalized voices has obscured the fact that the printed voice Gray developed did not just borrow artistic techniques from other cultures but adapted them to new literary forms (like the revived Pindaric ode) and recontextualized them within the literary marketplace so as to simulate the immediacy that he increasingly felt print circulation was destroying.

This recontextualization depends upon Gray’s exploration of the possibilities and advantages offered by the literate text and its printed dissemination. Kaul describes Gray’s imitations as a “complex and overdetermined literary exercise” about the disenfranchised poet “ventriloquizing the voice of ancient cultural empowerment” and recreating a “feudal poetics.” In this “literary exercise,” bardic voice is staged and enacted in writing, in print, and in instances of reading. The self-consciousness of Gray’s literary devices, such as the use of typography to distinguish among speakers in “The Bard” and the inclusion of para-texts to frame voices in his imitations, shows that the goal of his experiment was not to recreate an inherently oral “feudal poetics” or to revive a “pre-commercial past.” Gray devised a poetry that combines characteristics of art forms from the oral tradition with print’s ability to make present, delineate, and widely disseminate different voices. This poetry cultivates in its audience a relationship to reading texts that resembles listening to song and asserts that the intimacy of oral performance can be achieved by readers who are attuned, through education, to a text’s aural possibilities. The composition of this audience excludes many readers, of course, and clashes with the notion that bardic culture is, by definition, accessible to everyone. Even so, the communality and collectivity of printed voice offer not an escape from the literary marketplace but a way to reform it. Gray’s answer to the alienation that he encountered in the modern marketplace was to focus on a circumscribed, highly knowledgeable readership that would react to his printed works with the same sense of immediacy that he felt during Parry’s performance at Cambridge. The knowing listener became Gray’s model for the ideal reader.

Gray’s experiment with printed voice in his later poems thus reveals a very different relationship to the literary marketplace and the capabilities of printed texts than that which is currently accepted in studies of Gray. Rather than retreating from poetry and escaping into fantasies of medieval culture, his later poetry reached out to the growing constituency of eighteenth-century readers, whom scholars have too often believed only offended or embarrassed him, in an attempt to demonstrate that texts could please their senses and offer them an experience of the past. Gray was more optimistic about print and the literary
marketplace, that most modern of eighteenth-century institutions, than we have allowed him to be.

Furthermore, his carefully crafted attitude toward others’ oral voices and the literate text proved to be extremely persuasive for later poets, who looked to “The Bard” (and to a lesser degree, his imitations) as a model for their own writing. Gray’s attempts to reform the literary marketplace by engaging with representations of traditional oral voices motivated an important poetic tradition that lasted for the remainder of the eighteenth century. For Scottish authors, Gray’s poetry helped establish the marketplace for the Ossian poems, and for Anglo-Indian poets of the 1770s and 1780s, Gray’s representation of the bardic voice was an explicit template to be translated and adapted to the East as a way to comprehend colonialism. But it was Welsh authors, some of whom were Gray’s contemporaries and correspondents, who were most directly affected by his strategies for editing bardic voices.