

Fighting Words:  
Hidden Transcripts of Resistance in the Babylonian Talmud,  
Homer's *Odyssey* and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*

by

Jillian Grant Shoichet

B.A., University of British Columbia, 1995  
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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Gordon Shrimpton, Co-Supervisor  
(Department of Greek and Roman Studies)

Dr. Elizabeth Grove-White, Co-Supervisor  
(Department of English)

Dr. Andrew Rippin, Outside Member  
(Department of History)

Dr. Catherine Harding, Outside Member  
(Department of History in Art)

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### ABSTRACT

The study proposes that oral-traditional cultures, or cultures with a high degree of orality, use similar processes to hide political or social subversion in text. To test this hypothesis, the author examines three texts from three highly oral cultures: a tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, Homer's *Odyssey* and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. The author finds that in all three texts subversion is concealed according to what she defines as the three principles of disguise: *articulation*, by which a text hides secondary meaning through its use of diction and syntax; *construction*, by which a text incorporates hidden transcripts or meaning within its narrative or textual structure; and *diversion*, by which a text directs the audience away from subversive meaning by focusing attention on other elements. All three principles of disguise exploit the relationship between the written text and the oral-traditional environment in which the text was used.

The three-principle model of disguise enables us to set in comparative perspective relationships between the processes of communication and resistance in diverse cultures, and offers significant opportunities for comparative study. The author concludes that texts from diverse cultures may be employed similarly as extensions of oral tradition, especially when there is a need to conceal particular ideas from a dominant hegemony, and that reading these texts "against the grain" for evidence of subsurface subversion promises a deeper insight into both the function of text as a tool of resistance and the dynamics of human power relationships.

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from whom I have learned much.

# Fighting Words

*Hidden transcripts of resistance in the Babylonian Talmud, Homer's Odyssey and Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent*

## Introduction: Writing Resistance

The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires ... it seems to have favored the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment.

– Lévi-Strauss 1973, 299

Come and see the violence inherent in the system.  
Help, help, I'm being repressed!

– Dennis, a member of an anarcho-syndicalist commune, to King Arthur, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writing and literacy were often associated with power—the intellectual, social and political empowerment of the self, and, as the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss suggest, the intellectual, social and political exploitation of others. In both cases, the common perception has been that one's literacy abilities directly affect the degree to which one controls one's environment: Those who wield the tools of literacy also wield power over those who are not literate, and those who become literate increase their potential to better their personal social, political and intellectual circumstances. Missing from both of these scenarios is sufficient consideration of the relationship between writing and oral culture—a significant gap given the likelihood that how one expresses ideas and experiences in writing initially will depend to a large extent on how one expresses those ideas and experiences orally to one's contemporaries. For writing does not evolve in a vacuum<sup>1</sup>: how one writes, how one reads—how one becomes “literate”—is shaped by the environment in which particular texts are composed and used. If this environment includes a vibrant oral tradition and strong

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Thomas 1992.

dominant/subordinate hierarchies, then we can expect the texts produced in this environment both to incorporate and to reveal these qualities. In the same vein, we can also suggest the likelihood that texts written from the perspective of the subordinate, or with the subordinate experience in mind, will incorporate and reveal cultural elements not necessarily present in texts produced by, or from the perspective of, the dominant culture.

This study presents an analysis of the relationship between writing and power through an exploration of the textual representation of resistance—particularly hidden resistance, that is, resistance encoded within the text to seem less threatening, or even benign, to the dominant group. I do not reflect here on the strident resistance embodied in revolution and rebellion but, rather, the quiet resistance that goes on in the interstices between more violent political and social upheavals.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, I consider how writing might be used to *disguise* subversion, providing essentially a secret environment in which members of the subordinate group might conduct a dialogue of resistance “off stage,” relatively removed from the watchful eyes of the dominant power.<sup>3</sup> My proposal is this: that oral-traditional cultures, or cultures with a high degree of orality, use similar processes to hide political or social subversion in text—processes that directly or indirectly reflect the oral-traditional environment in which the text was created and used. These processes employ three principles: *articulation*, by which a text hides secondary meaning through its use of diction and syntax; *construction*, by which a text incorporates hidden meaning within its narrative or textual structure; and *diversion*, by which a text directs the audience away from subversive meaning by focusing attention on other elements. A text that employed these principles of disguise would in effect subvert the authority of its own writing—and thus, to some extent mock the power of the dominant group—by using those very cultural elements commonly associated with the subordinate group and its oral traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Scott 1990.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of a hidden transcript of resistance is explored by James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), which builds on his previous *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) and his *Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976).

To test this model, the study examines in detail three texts from widely diverse cultural settings: an excerpt from tractate Avodah Zarah in the Babylonian Talmud (c. 500-600 CE), Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 750 BCE) and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800). I read these texts against the grain for evidence of what political scientist James Scott (1990) has called a "hidden transcript of resistance." The results of this reading suggest that it may be possible to make broad, pan-cultural statements about the nature of human resistance to domination and the expression of this resistance in text, and in doing so, to present a more nuanced reflection on the multifaceted role of writing as a medium of disguise, a mode of transmission and a tool of power.

Before we can test this model, however, we must review how scholars in the past have understood the relationship of literacy to oral tradition, and how that perception has changed in the past few decades. Only then is it possible to see how James Scott's model of hidden transcripts might be modified to suit our exploration of text as a potential disguise for resistance. Where Claude Lévi-Strauss's observation suggests that writing and text are most often the tools of the politically strong, I argue that writing and text may also be, in Scott's parlance, formidable "weapons of the weak." But as the goals of the weak differ from the goals of the strong, we must expect that the use of writing by the weak will likely also differ from the use of writing by the strong. As much as possible, we must be open to seeing how a particular subordinate group might perceive the value of writing and text and the nature of meaningful resistance. While writing may sometimes be used as a tool of the tyrant and "favour the exploitation of human beings," it may also be used by those less powerful, who seek to define their political and social roles somewhere between open defiance and total submission.

### **Rethinking the relationship between literacy and power**

Today, our insight into the diversity and complexity of the human relationship with the written word is somewhat distorted by our convictions about our own particular brand of literacy. In the modern Western world, being "literate" is indicative of one's ability to take part in the daily life of the community. Those who are not

literate are frequently portrayed as having little or no power in their personal lives. Our social and economic structures reinforce this message, making it challenging for an illiterate or semi-literate individual to engage in such mundane activities as shopping for groceries, taking public transit, using a bank machine, applying for a job, obtaining an education, voting in an election or ordering food at a restaurant, let alone participating in the wider social and political discourse of the community in an ongoing and meaningful way.

Yet for much of human history, not being able to read or write incurred no disadvantages to the non-literate and was not necessarily indicative of social status. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, kings benefited from the products of literacy but left the physical tasks of writing and reading to the servants.<sup>4</sup> In ancient Greece, where “a civilized man ... had to be able, above all, to speak well in public,”<sup>5</sup> oral argument and testimony were preferred over writing, which was widely distrusted.<sup>6</sup> In medieval Europe, while only a small percentage of the population could actually read the Bible, much of the population was well versed in its contents and the accepted interpretations of key elements; one’s non-literacy did not necessarily affect one’s participation in a society that was almost wholly mediated by biblical referents and values.<sup>7</sup> In the Second Temple period, the vast majority of Jews would not have read the Torah themselves but, rather, would have *heard it read* aloud in the Temple each week.<sup>8</sup> In early modern Britain, the practice of reading aloud was not only a means of passing information on to a large crowd of varying literate abilities but also a popular form of entertainment in and of itself: hearing a text read aloud was for many reasons preferable to reading it on one’s own.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we do not see the evolution of a large “reading public” in the West, in which an individual was more likely to be able to read than not, until quite late in the early modern

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas 1992, 150.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas 1992, 3.

<sup>6</sup> By Plato, for one—see *Phaedrus*.

<sup>7</sup> Stock 1983; McKitterick 1989, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See particularly the discussion in Jaffee (2001, 15-20) on the oral/aural aspects of Second Temple literacy.

<sup>9</sup> See Coleman 1996.

period, long after the invention of the printing press made printed texts widely available.<sup>10</sup>

Until late in the twentieth century, however, much scholarship on literacy focused on the supposed consequences of an emerging literacy, including advances in the newly literate community's social evolution, which in turn would lead to changes in social and political power structures. Lévi-Strauss draws a connection between writing and exploitation: Those "exploited" by the strong are unable to protect themselves when writing is used to build new power structures or enforce social hierarchies or ways of being. Other scholars have drawn similar connections between literacy and social power. Jared Diamond (1999) argues that literacy played a significant role in the violent Spanish conquest of Peru,<sup>11</sup> where the Incas' illiteracy and ignorance of the Bible were understood by the Spanish as evidence of their inferiority.<sup>12</sup> Janet Cornelius (1983) argues that in the antebellum South, "literacy was a two-edged sword": On one hand, a slave owner might hope that a minimal degree of slave literacy would help to ensure his control over his slaves (a literate slave could read and follow written instructions, for example); on the other hand, a slave might learn to read and write in order to increase control over his or her own life. Cornelius finds that a few slaves "wrote their own passes and escaped from slavery," and that after their liberation some slaves "were able to capitalize on

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<sup>10</sup> See Eisenstein 1979.

<sup>11</sup> The Spanish conquest of the New World began in the early sixteenth century, when literacy in the New World was limited to a few populations in parts of what is now modern Mexico. The Incas knew nothing of the Spaniards until Francisco Pizarro landed on the Peruvian coast in 1527. What little information the Incan emperor had of the invaders came to him by word of mouth, primarily from a single envoy who visited Pizarro's troops while they were moving inland from the coast. The envoy, who "saw the Spaniards at their most disorganized," indicated to the emperor that they did not pose a threat (Diamond 1999, 79). For their part, the Spaniards were "heirs to a huge [literary] body of knowledge about human behavior and history," and their patronizing view of the Incas was shaped by a long literate tradition of European conquest narratives (80).

<sup>12</sup> Diamond (1999, 71-72) cites a letter written by one of Francisco Pizarro's supporters:

Atahualpa asked for the Book, that he might look at it, and the Friar gave it to him closed. Atahualpa did not know how to open the Book, and the Friar was extending his arm to do so, when Atahualpa, in great anger, gave him a blow on the arm, not wishing that it should be opened. Then he opened it himself, and, without any astonishment at the letters and paper he threw it away from him five or six paces, his face a deep crimson.

The Friar returned to Pizarro, shouting "Come out! Come out, Christians! Come at these enemy dogs who reject the things of God. That tyrant has thrown my book of holy law to the ground! Did you not see what happened? Why remain polite and servile toward this over-proud dog when the plains are full of Indians? March out against him, for I absolve you!"

their skills in literacy” as they began new careers.<sup>13</sup> Becoming literate was not without risk, however: One former slave recalled that “the first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine tails and the third time they cut off the first jint offen your forefinger.” Another remembered a “woman named Nancy durin’ the war what could read and ‘rite. When her master, Oliver Perry, found dis out he made her pull off naked, whipped her and den slapped hot irons to her all over. Believe me dat nigger didn’t want to read and ‘rite no more.”<sup>14</sup> The work of white antebellum authors such as Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain lends additional support to the presumption of a correlation between literacy and power: arguably, through the very act of recording the oral-traditional folktales of the black subject-narrator (as in the case of Harris’ Br’er Rabbit cycle, for example), the white author-journalist exerts control over them.

Yet this presumption also encourages distortions that limit our understanding of human experience. Two of these distortions are particularly relevant to this study. When we presume a particular relationship between literacy and power (or between writing and exploitation), we encourage the idea that “non-literacy” and “weakness” are somehow causally related, and we overlook a major player in the literacy/power dynamic, namely, the subordinate, or “exploited,” individual himself. By correlating writing and text with the politically or socially powerful, we strengthen the illusion that literacy is a realm to which only the powerful have access, and that one increases one’s power by increasing one’s literacy. For many centuries, it is true, the materials needed for writing and reading were most commonly associated with the upper classes (whether members of these classes knew how to read and write themselves, or commissioned others to read and write for them).<sup>15</sup> This does not mean, however, that those who did not read or write would necessarily have been negatively affected by their non-literacy, or that they would have been unable to take advantage of what writing or reading might offer by way of social and political

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<sup>13</sup> Cornelius 1983, 171.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius 1983, 174.

<sup>15</sup> For expenses connected with text production and preservation in various time periods, see discussions in McKitterick 1989, Jaffee 2001, Van der Toorn 2007, Clanchy 1993 and Small 1997, among others.

advantage, communication or, indeed, exploitation. In the three texts taken up in this study, meaning arguably can be embodied not only in the written words themselves but in the oral-traditional referents “beyond” the words. This feature suggests that particular meanings of a text may not be accessible to a literate reader who is unfamiliar with the oral-traditional context being referenced. This method of “supratextual” disguise, I argue, enables an oral-traditional (for example, subordinate) group to hide potentially subversive meanings from a wider literate (for example, dominant) audience. Yet much recent scholarship is preoccupied with the use of writing as a function of the dominant group, and the use of oral-traditional modes of communication (that is, *rather than* literate ones) as a function of the subordinate group.<sup>16</sup> While some research considers the interplay of oral and literate modes of communication within a single group of people,<sup>17</sup> there has not been much scholarship to date on the relationship between writing and social power in the context of this oral/ literate interplay.

#### *The autonomous model of literacy*

Popular for much of the twentieth century, the autonomous model of literacy<sup>18</sup> presumed that literacy could be isolated as an independent “autonomous” variable within a particular cultural context, and that the emergence of literacy in a society had certain (often predictable) social, cultural and intellectual consequences.<sup>19</sup> Within this structuralist framework, oral culture is early or primitive; literacy is a

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<sup>16</sup> For the use of writing by individuals or groups in power, see Steiner 1994, for example; for the use of oral-traditional modes by groups not in power, see Scott 1990.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Carruthers 1990, 1998; Coleman 1996; Ó Ciosáin 1997; Svenbro 1988; and Wise 1998.

<sup>18</sup> See Street 1984, 2.

<sup>19</sup> This model has also been called the Great Divide model of literacy, as it posits a Great Divide between literate and non-literate cultures, in much the same way that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropologists theorized that there existed a Great Divide between “primitive” and “modern” cultures. Most famously argued by Goody and Watt (1968), Goody (1977, 1987), Havelock (1982, 1986), Ong (1982) and Luria (1976), the Great Divide model of literacy has largely been discredited by more recent scholarship, which demands a more nuanced approach that includes the acknowledgment of interplay between oral and literate traditions. Despite its failings, however, the autonomous model revolutionized contemporary research on the role of literacy in a range of academic fields, from anthropology to history to psychology. Finnegan (1988) credits proponents of the autonomous model of literacy with encouraging an examination of writing as a social and cultural phenomenon in its own right (rather than simply a means of communication), with tangible implications for social, cultural and intellectual evolution.

later development “out of” oral culture. An oral-traditional society’s adoption of writing consequently leads to advancements in technology, science, philosophy, rhetoric and social and political organization.

With the autonomous model, a culture’s literacy can be ranked according to how “advanced” or “complete” they are in comparison to modern Western literacy. If a culture is exposed to writing and literacy yet does not “advance” along developmental lines comparable to those of Western culture, it can be argued that it has not used writing to its full potential—that is, it has failed to achieve what other (literate) cultures have achieved. The autonomous model grants the highest evolutionary marks to the Greeks, whose innovative addition of vowels to Semitic script has been hailed by some cultural historians as one of the greatest inventions in human history.<sup>20</sup> Other writing systems were deemed imprecise and (therefore) not conducive to the sorts of technological, philosophical and cultural developments that (it was argued by some) grew out of the Greeks’ use of a fully modulated alphabet and the later adoption of the alphabet by others.<sup>21</sup>

According to proponents of this model, the determinative qualities of literacy derive from the cognitive changes in those who learn to read or write: Literates think differently from non-literates. In his seminal twentieth-century study, A.R. Luria (1976) found that moderately literate subjects tended to group objects into abstract categories, while non-literate subjects grouped objects according to practical application.<sup>22, 23</sup> Luria’s study was cited by many to support the claim that literacy

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<sup>20</sup> See Havelock 1982, Goody 1977, Ong 1982.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Havelock 1982. Various Greek historians have suggested that the Greeks’ addition of vowels to the Phoenician alphabet in the seventh or eighth century BCE indicates the Greeks’ desire to record the sounds of human speech. Albert Lord made this argument most famously in his *Singer of Tales* (1960), in which he hypothesized that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the written records of what had originally been orally composed and orally transmitted epic poems. See also Svenbro (1988), who examines the relationship between writing and reading and concludes, among other things, that reading in ancient Greece was generally an oral activity—that is, that reading was most often done aloud. If this was the case, then “[w]riting itself could [also] thus logically be claimed to be ‘oral.’ For as we shall see, Greek writing was first and foremost a machine for producing sounds” (2).

<sup>22</sup> Luria’s fieldwork was conducted in remote regions of Uzbekistan, Kirghizya and the Soviet Union in 1931 and 1932. His subjects included illiterate and moderately literate peasants who were each given a series of four illustrations of familiar objects and asked to group the “like” objects together. One particular series included illustrations of a log, a hammer, a saw and a hatchet. Instead of grouping the three tools together, an illiterate subject in his mid-twenties held that the saw, the hatchet and the log were “all alike. The saw will saw the log and the hatchet will chop it into small

did not simply enable man to reorder his understanding of the world but also produced changes in cognitive ability that would enable him to think in different ways, which in turn would lead to advances in science, art, economics and other areas. An illiterate individual was not capable of thinking in abstract terms because *he did not have the cognitive tools to do so*; in the words of Walter Ong, “writing restructures consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> Writing was thus viewed as the basic building block for abstract thinking, its substitution of letters for sounds itself an elemental form of abstraction.<sup>25</sup>

Despite its attractiveness as an explanatory tool, the autonomous model has several disadvantages. First, it encourages the misperception that we all know what we are talking about (and, moreover, that we are all talking about the same thing) when we use terms such as “oral culture” and “literacy.” In truth, every academic field defines these terms differently, and even within a single field definitions change according to academic, political and social agendas. In addition to defining their terms differently, various academic fields also approach the *study* of literacy differently from each other, asking different questions and using different methods. As Brian Stock wryly observes, the contemporary study of oral and written culture has “evolved as an interdisciplinary field, but one in which, for better or worse, there is no central discipline,” and though “[t]he oralities and literacies of the past are regularly made the subject of inquiries by linguists, philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, and historians ... there is no common methodology, and the methods developed in one discipline are not always recognized in others.”<sup>26</sup> Yet even were differences in definition and method resolved, a comparative study of oral

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pieces” (56). Another subject, a teenager who had attended a local school for two years, used an abstract category—“tools”—to separate the illustrations into two groups.

<sup>23</sup> It was not Luria’s stated intention to demonstrate aspects of literacy *per se*. But despite Luria’s “elaborate Marxist scaffolding” (Street 1984, 50) and his interest in cognitive development as it relates to “collectivization” and “the unregulated individualistic economy centered on agriculture” (Luria 1976, 14), “Luria’s report clearly turns in fact on the differences between orality and literacy” (Street 1984, 50).

<sup>24</sup> Ong 1982, 77.

<sup>25</sup> This assumption has been challenged by various scholars, most famously Scribner and Cole (1981), who concluded from their fieldwork with the Vai people of Liberia that schooling and the education system in place in a particular community are more apt to produce changes in cognition than is literacy. See, however, criticism of Scribner and Cole’s methods and conclusions by Goody (1987) and Olson (1994).

<sup>26</sup> Stock 1996 [1990], 141.

and literate cultures using an autonomous model still presents challenges. The autonomous model presumes that literacy and orality are mutually exclusive or, at least, that when people enter the literate world they begin to leave their oral-traditional identity behind. Yet if this is the case, where do we draw the line between the literate and the oral? When do we become literate? When do we cease to be oral? People and their traditions are not easily classified as literate, non-literate or moderately literate (or, conversely, oral or oral-traditional); the possible parameters of literacy (and orality) are far more complex than these overly simplistic categories allow. Arguably, many traditions can be classified as both oral *and* literate.<sup>27</sup> Until we determine exactly which elements we wish to compare and how we might do so, and what language we will use to discuss our findings, interdisciplinary discussions of “orality” and “literacy” are not very meaningful.<sup>28</sup>

A second disadvantage of the autonomous model is that it reinforces certain preconceptions about what constitutes evidence of literacy. If a tradition or practice is not immediately recognizable to us as a stage of literacy, we are more likely to dismiss it than to consider how our evolutionary model may require modification. Instead, we set up a false relationship between literacy and orality—that is, that the one not only evolves out of the other but also leaves it behind in the process. Within this framework, where a population is either oral *or* literate, and a tradition is either an oral tradition *or* a literate one, we presume that oral and literate traditions will be most comparable in how they differ. We are not predisposed to look for evidence of similarity; we look for evidence of dichotomy and dissonance rather than symbiosis, synchronicity or, simply, side-by-side existence.

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<sup>27</sup> There are many types and modes of literacy, and many types and modes of orality. This complicates our analysis of any tradition, whether it is perceived to be primarily oral or primarily literate. When we speak of oral or literate traditions, do we mean traditions of composition? Preservation? Transmission? Discourse? A combination of one or more of these? The appendix to this study offers a framework for considering the oral and literate aspects of a work in preparation for comparative analysis.

<sup>28</sup> Hence the limited usefulness of Harris's (1989) literacy rates for the ancient world, which vary between 5 and 10 percent. Though Harris is suitably cautious (his estimates are based on what scanty textual and archaeological evidence is available for the ancient world), his figures are frequently cited liberally and out of context as “typical” literacy rates for the ancient world, often without any discussion as to what kind of literacy is meant.

Third, the autonomous model encourages the perception that modern Western literacy is the best possible end result—with all other “stages” of literacy being somehow less than ideal. We speak of cultures that are functionally literate, semi-literate, moderately literate, illiterate or pre-literate—all of these somehow *less than* literate. This underlying valuation of literacy over orality shapes not only how we examine the evidence but also what sort of questions we ask. We consider evidence in light of how it fits into our pre-constructed model (of orality as “primitive” and literacy as “advanced,” and of the former as situated earlier on a chronological time line than the latter). The questions we ask tend to be worded so that the answers we find also suggest how the evidence we have fits into this model.<sup>29</sup>

*The ideological model of literacy*

In the last half of the twentieth century, increasing interest in interdisciplinary studies in the Humanities encouraged scholars to consider man’s experience of literacy not in isolation from his other experiences, but as one element of his social and intellectual existence—one that shapes and is shaped by other elements. Where the autonomous model sought to isolate literacy from its cultural context, a more functionalist, ideological model sought to present a picture of literacy as it is used within a cultural setting. First summarized by B.V. Street (1984), the ideological model focuses on the specific applications of reading and writing in particular social

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<sup>29</sup> I do not argue here against the principle of constructing a cultural-historical model and examining a body of evidence with a view to determining how well it fits into that model. Our understanding of many ancient cultures must be gleaned in this way, as the body of available evidence is often dismally small and cannot be understood unless it is set within the context of an overarching (necessarily pre-constructed) interpretive framework. See, for example, Kittredge (2004), who discusses the importance of the model for the biblical scholar particularly and the ancient historian more generally, and Schwartz (2001), who uses an imperialism model to interpret evidence from Hellenistic and Roman Judaea and compares the usefulness of this model to the historical models used by others. It is important, however, to acknowledge the potential pitfalls of presuming the accuracy of any one model for the interpretation of all the historical evidence available for a particular community. The evidence does not speak for itself: Man *interprets* the evidence. Artifacts are not meaningful in themselves: Humans *imbue them* with meaning. In a very real way, the meaning of the evidence we find depends on the contextual model we use to interpret it. This in turn determines which words we use to describe our findings to others. A piece of evidence that has one meaning within one historical model might have a very different meaning within another historical model. See Brandfon’s (1987) illuminating discussion on the limits of archaeological evidence. Cf. Seth Schwartz (2001, 2), who argues that “historical remains, both literary and physical, are opaque,” and even the most diehard empiricist does not simply “uncover” their meaning.

contexts rather than on the general consequences of literacy. Writing, argue the functionalists, does not evolve in isolation. The social institutions in which literacy is used, how writing and reading are taught and learned and by whom, and the interplay between oral and literate traditions all help to determine the meaning and function of literacy for those who participate in a literate community.

This model owes much to the principles of New Historicism, a movement in literary criticism that places emphasis on the relationship between the “evidence”—whether that evidence be a literary text, a documentary source or an inscription on stone—and the cultural context of the evidence. Context shapes the meaning and relevance of the text for those who create, preserve and transmit it. In other words, argue Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (2000), “the writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and ... their achievements must draw upon a whole life-world and ... this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself.”<sup>30</sup> The New Historicists strive to read culture as a text, a notion that “carries the core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated.” The New Historicist thus seeks to discover “something that the authors we study would not have had sufficient distance upon themselves and their own era to grasp.”<sup>31</sup> Key to the New Historicist approach are both the nature and the function of the text within a particular environment: “If an entire culture is regarded as a text, then ... it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is representation and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event.”<sup>32</sup> A text is not only a record of the writer’s thoughts; it also plays a much more active role in history—shaping social, political, intellectual and other cultural exchanges.

The perceived need to define “literacy” more clearly has also fueled the development of ideological alternatives to the autonomous model. Recent attempts to clarify the term have resulted in a warehouse of colourful adjective-noun combinations: “narrative literacy” (the capacity to read and understand prose

<sup>30</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 15.

narrative), “expository literacy” (the ability to locate and interpret information), and “document literacy” (the ability to apply what one has read for a particular purpose)<sup>33</sup>; “information literacy,” “computer literacy,” and “new-media literacy”; “cultural,” “multicultural” and “global literacy” (referring to one’s ability to incorporate a broad view of cultural similarity and difference into an understanding of social context and cultural relationships); “moral literacy” and “emotional literacy” (suggesting an individual’s ability to function appropriately within particular social environments).<sup>34</sup> But while parsing out this “plurality of literacies”<sup>35</sup> serves to clarify which literacy a scholar has in mind when he or she uses the term, it dilutes the opportunity to engage in useful comparative analysis. With each new cross-cultural comparison, we must redefine “literacy,” which changes according to the context. Yet as soon as we narrow our definition of literacy, we inevitably reduce its meaningfulness in other environments, making cross-cultural comparisons of literacy and texts very difficult. Ultimately, “literacy” cannot be defined in isolation from the context in which it functions; it is precisely its context that gives the term its meaning. Different literacy activities require different types of literacy.<sup>36</sup> Each culture uses writing in a different way and thus demands different literacy skills from its members in order for them to be deemed functionally literate. One culture’s functional literacy will likely differ markedly from another culture’s functional literacy, and the criteria for determining the functional literacy of two individuals from two different cultures will also differ. One’s level of literacy may indicate one’s ability to read, or write, or both, but it may also suggest one’s social class or one’s social savvy. And while the condition of “illiteracy” in our modern Western environment carries with it negative connotations (often of poverty, ignorance or social ineptitude as well as the inability to write or

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<sup>33</sup> Clanchy 1993 [1979] uses the term “document-minded” to refer to twelfth- and thirteenth-century England, where written documents became a common element of administrative life. Clanchy points out, however, that writing a document is quite different from reading a document, let alone storing a document with the intention of referring to it at some point in the future.

<sup>34</sup> Collins and Blot 2003; Steiner 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Collins and Blot 2003.

<sup>36</sup> See Collins 1995 and Collins and Blot 2003.

read), in many cultural environments throughout history the condition of “non-literacy” held no such stigma.<sup>37</sup>

When the focus shifts from “what writing does to people” to “what people do with writing,” it becomes clear that the function of writing is not limited to its usefulness as a means to preserve and transmit information. Early Tibetan Buddhist monks, for example, used writing to trace prayers on water; in other cultures, water used to “wash” particular written texts was believed to have healing properties.<sup>38</sup> In Numbers 5:23-24, an adulterous woman is forced to drink water into which a written curse has been “diluted”—literally drinking her punishment. In ancient Greece, how the name of the individual to be cursed was inscribed on the tablet, or what was done to the tablet after the name was inscribed, determined the nature of the curse: “By piercing the written name with a nail, the maker of the tablet hoped similarly to transfix his victim; by inscribing the name in reverse or upside down, the writer could dizzy and disorient the nominee. From the fourth century on, the authors of curses throw their tablets into wells, fountains, and other bodies of water ... By drowning the name, the deviser of the curse encourages his victim to suffer an analogous paralysis or chilly death.”<sup>39</sup> Even when writing *is* used to preserve and transmit information, its meaning is not limited to the content of the text *per se*. Various scholars emphasize the importance of the medium, the method of display and the relationship between writer and reader—all have symbolic significance apart from the written words themselves.<sup>40</sup> A kingly decree carved in stone, for example, indicates a permanence and power that an elementary school exercise imprinted in wax or clay does not. Ancient texts displayed on surfaces so high that the characters themselves could not have been read easily by individuals on the ground are,

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<sup>37</sup> Even if we were to determine the level of one’s functional literacy and compare it to the functional literacy of another, we do not, in the end, have a very useful comparison. To determine that Individual A from Culture X is “functionally literate” while Individual B from Culture Y is not indicates, perhaps, how adept a literate is in relation to others in his own environment, but because the character of functional literacy in each environment differs, the descriptions are useful only alongside an anecdotal description of the nature of literacy in the particular cultures being investigated. And as the nature of literacy in each culture may vary dramatically, the basis for comparison may in fact be minimal, if it can be identified at all.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas 1992, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Steiner 1994, 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> See particularly Steiner 1994; Thomas 1989, 1992 and 2001; and Svenbro 1988.

arguably, primarily symbolic in-meaning, proclaiming the power of the individual who ordered them to be written. Modern-day examples of symbolic writing are not difficult to find. The Vietnam War Veterans memorial in Washington, DC, for example, includes the names of thousands of dead or missing American soldiers, but few visitors read the text from beginning to end. The primary meaning of the words is in the silent tribute their collective presence and presentation represents. The symbolic, “extratextual” meaning of writing is of particular importance to this study; in the chapters that follow, I argue that the extratextual meaning of the three texts examined serves to disguise politically or socially subversive ideas.

In cultures where only a few individuals are able to read and the number of texts is limited, reading is done aloud, often within a group setting.<sup>41</sup> In such environments, reading and writing are arguably oral activities rather than strictly literate ones, and the line between oral and literate is blurred. In these settings, writing and text might take a back seat to oral tradition.<sup>42</sup> Carruthers (1990, 1998) notes that in medieval European society, where writing materials were both expensive and time-consuming to produce (as well as difficult to store and preserve), individuals relied on their memory not only to store what they had read in order to recall it later when it was needed, but also to compose *new* material.<sup>43</sup> Writing was primarily an *aide-mémoire*—one of many, and often not the most practical.

Rosamond McKitterick (1989), also writing about medieval Europe, considers how textual format determined the development of literacy and even the meaning of texts themselves. Texts in the ancient and medieval worlds were often physically difficult to read: scrolls were large and awkward to handle, there was no spacing between words (making it almost impossible to read unless one sounded the letters

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Svenbro 1988, Ó Ciosáin 1997, Stock 1983 and Coleman 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Svenbro (1988) examines the relationship between writing and reading and concludes that reading in ancient Greece was generally an oral activity—that is, reading was most often done aloud. Stock studies the “textual communities” of medieval Europe, where not all members were literate but where daily life was mediated by one’s relationship to the Bible (1983). It could be argued that the Torah provided a similar foundation for the “textual communities” of biblical Israel and rabbinic Judaism. And given that Homeric imagery is common throughout classical writing, the Homeric poems likely served a similar purpose for ancient Greece and Rome.

<sup>43</sup> From this she argues that memory—not writing—was the major creative compositional tool of the medieval and ancient worlds. Even in those medieval cultures where a certain degree of literacy could be expected from a relatively high percentage of the population, memory remained the primary learning and compositional tool (see especially Carruthers 1990).

aloud), and frequently several texts might be included in a single scroll or codex. These realities limited where texts could be stored and who could access them. We can read meaning, for example, in the effort and expense taken in Carolingian France to preserve particular texts in elaborately bejeweled and delicately scripted codices.<sup>44</sup> The care and expense might indicate the wealth or power of the text-owner, or the importance of the document itself. Reading, writing and “text-making” were not everyday, everyman activities. Clanchy (1993) suggests that in medieval England, the meaning of writing was often in the ritual action of writing itself rather than in the words on the page: In eleventh- and twelfth-century England, it was frequently *the act of writing* that ratified the contract rather than the written signature. Written records did not *take the place of* oral-traditional rituals of contractual obligation but were used *in addition to* such rituals.<sup>45</sup> This interplay between the oral and the literate is of particular significance in this study, as I argue that extratextual meaning may be layered onto a text and potentially hidden from certain members of the audience through the use of oral-traditional referents. Elements of the written text can act as cues to oral-traditional meaning—meaning accessible only to those who are familiar with the oral-traditional context being referenced.

#### *A New Historicist reading of literacy in oral-traditional environments*

This study employs elements of the ideological model of literacy and takes an essentially New Historicist approach to the textual material, for several reasons. First, New Historicism encourages the interpretation of a broad range of material: Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) note that “[t]he notion of culture as text ... vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted....Some of these

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<sup>44</sup> See McKitterick’s (1989) discussion on the economic dimension of book production in the medieval world (135-64).

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, while the production of written documents in medieval England increased markedly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Clanchy argues that there was a significant time-lag between the creation of documents and their storage in archives—and another gap between their archival storage and archival organization for the purposes of future reference. The written form of a contract was often not preserved by the parties, or—if it was preserved—not stored in a manner that invited future consultation (see his discussion in Chapter 2). This suggests that particular applications of writing (as records for future reference, for example) may not be perceived immediately by a population, or may not be perceived immediately as useful.

alternative objects of attention are literary works regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon. Others are texts that have been regarded as altogether nonliterary, that is, lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction that separately or together characterize *belles lettres*.”<sup>46</sup> The New Historicist perspective enables me to view all three texts in this study—a tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, a Greek oral epic from the eighth century BCE and an eighteenth-century novel from Ireland—as windows onto a particular cultural environment. I can presume that all have the capacity to tell me *something* of the world in which they were produced and used.

Second, a New Historicist method is inherently interdisciplinary in its approach. Popularized in the US in the late 1960s and ‘70s, New Historicism embraced the texts and perspectives of those who, until recently, had been largely excluded from the study of literature, including Jews, African Americans and, particularly, women: Write Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000), “Women’s studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for New Historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum. It has also served to politicize explicitly an academic discourse that had often attempted to avoid or conceal partisan or polemical commitments, and it unsettles familiar aesthetic hierarchies that had manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, the cultural significance of women.”<sup>47</sup> Reading a text through a New Historicist lens encourages the reader to consider alternative meanings, suggested by the less audible voices of the marginalized.

Third, the New Historicist program looks beyond the text for clues to the text’s meaning, seeking to “[find] the creative power that shapes literary works *outside* the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as *within* those boundaries.... [the intention] is not to aestheticize an entire culture, but to locate

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<sup>46</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 11.

inventive energies more deeply-interfused within it.”<sup>48</sup> This aspect of the New Historicist method serves as a model for the approach taken in this study to exploring the likelihood of extratextual, oral-traditional meaning in written text. I argue that the environment in which the text is produced will directly affect the meaning of the written words. If a written text is produced in a highly oral-traditional environment, then we can expect that the meaning of the text will be shaped by oral-traditional elements.

For the New Historicist, every text—whether it be a mundane list or an epic masterpiece—offers us a glimpse into the cultural, economic and/or political context in which it was written and, indeed, cannot be adequately interpreted outside of this framework. Authors are not simply observers of their environment, they are participants, and their literary work may offer us insight into not only their personal perspectives, philosophies, conflicts and anxieties but also those views typical of a certain time and place.<sup>49</sup> Employing a New Historicist approach to the study of texts produced in an oral-traditional environment, or in an environment in which literacy is new or rare, encourages the researcher to consider very particular questions about the character of the emerging literacy: Was the writing system introduced from outside, or was it developed within the oral-traditional community itself? What is the primary function of writing in this society, and what is the nature of the relationship between the culture’s oral traditions and its written text? Who writes? Who reads? What is written? What is read? In what contexts do writing and reading activities take place? A New Historicist reading ameliorates the temptation to use an interpretive framework more suited to our contemporary experience: we are more likely to read the text with an awareness of how our modern cultural sensibilities

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<sup>48</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 12.

<sup>49</sup> In the words of talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin, the common guiding principle for the New Historicists is the “rejection of the view that literature and art form an autonomous, time-less realm of transcendent value and significance, and concomitantly, promulgation of the conviction that this view is itself the historical, ideological construction of a particular time and place in cultural history. Stated more positively, literature and art are one practice among many by which a culture organizes its production of meaning and values and structures itself” (Boyarin 1995, 12-13). Boyarin’s subsequent analysis of how New Historicist principles might inform a study of texts is well thought out, and I have relied on his insights throughout this section and those that follow.

inform our perceptions.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the New Historicist view discourages an interpretation of the text as a discrete, self-contained world, in which principles of organization, reason, politics and morality can be understood only in relation to each other. According to the New Historicist view, the author cannot help but create, within the world of the text, an environment that is suggestive of his or her own. Even an historical fiction—though it may present fictional or fictionalized events in an historical context—suggests aspects of the environment *in which it was written*. Our interpretation of a text, then, should consider not only the environment presented by the text itself but also the environment in which the writer writes.<sup>51</sup>

According to the principles of New Historicism, while any *documentary* source can potentially help to deepen our understanding of the environment in which the text was created, any *literary* source can help illuminate the relevance and meaning of documentary evidence, serving to flesh out our view of the setting in which it functions. Reasons Daniel Boyarin, every text, whether it be a letter, a memoir, a grocery list, a real estate contract, a kingly decree or a funerary oratory, “provides access in some sense to a less processed, more transparent version of the discursive practices of the period and can thus serve as explanatory context for the ‘text’ [i.e., the literary text being deconstructed].”<sup>52</sup> Boyarin continues: “In an essay written in the new-historicist mode, my text would open with a historical anecdote drawn from some kind of palpably documentary source—a letter, memoir, or memorandum to

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<sup>50</sup> That is, a New Historicist reading encourages us to acknowledge the likelihood that our ability to understand and interpret the uses and meaning of writing in a particular culture is limited by our (in)ability to recognize what those uses or meanings may be. Would we, as modern literates, necessarily recognize all the nuances of writing usage and meaning in a particular time and place unlike our own?

<sup>51</sup> There are various critiques of the New Historicist approach to literary criticism, not the least of which is that it can diminish the importance of a text as a work of literature in and of itself, with literary qualities that transcend its historical context and have meaning apart from their supposed “reflection” of historical time and place. The New Historicist perspective also has about it an air of futility: There can be no objective history, as there is no objective observation. Every literary work, as the product of an author who inhabits a unique political and cultural environment, is inherently subjective. This inevitably calls into question the work of the New Historicist himself: If all literature is suggestive of the author’s particular social environment, then any observations we make about a literary work are in some way indicative of our own political and cultural environment, and are thus not objective and must be understood within their “historical” context. At the same time, however, it is by no means always clear *how* a particular piece of literature may suggest its historical context, and our conclusions about this are shaped by our own expectations and environment.

<sup>52</sup> Boyarin 1995, 13.

the king—and then proceed to reading it together with a literary text par excellence, deconstructing, as it were, the very dichotomy between the literary and the documentary, showing not that the documentary is literary, but that the literary is no less documentary than the document.”<sup>53</sup> Yet this New Historicist model arguably implies that each text can be read separately, or that each text can serve *autonomously* as explanatory context for the other. So Boyarin extends the model with a Foucauldian twist: Texts should not be read as individual artefacts but, rather, as elements of an ongoing social discourse. In this way, the *relationship* between various textual sources serves as a more nuanced explanatory context for documentary and literary sources:

When literature is seen as a contingent phenomenon produced in and by discourse, then a whole set of new objects and connections becomes immediately and directly available for study: social processes that flow through and irresistibly connect “literary” texts with many other kinds of texts, and social meanings that are produced in different ways from many social sites. This concept, following Foucault’s influential usage, emphasizes literature as a process rather than simply a set of products; a process which is intrinsically social, connected at every point with mechanisms and institutions that mediate and control the flow of knowledge and power in a community.<sup>54</sup>

This view of all literature as social discourse is particularly germane to Boyarin’s study of the Talmud, for example, where the line between documentary and literary is essentially non-existent: “When we study the Talmud, this sense of the documentary must be abandoned once and for all. All of the texts available are of the same epistemological status. They are all literary or all documents in precisely the same degree; indeed, they all occur within the same texts, between the same covers. There is literally (virtually) nothing outside the text.”<sup>55</sup> The New Historicist-inspired understanding of literature as simply one practice among many social practices is especially relevant in the analysis of hidden resistance in ancient and/or highly oral-traditional environments, as in many cases “it [i.e., writing] is virtually the only practice to which we have access. Since no assumption is made of an essential difference between literary and other texts or between textual and other practice, we

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<sup>53</sup> Boyarin 1995, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Hodge 1990, viii, cited in Boyarin 1995, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Boyarin 1995, 13.

read what we have as a textual practice, co-reading many different sub-texts in search of access to the discourse of the society in which they were produced.”<sup>56</sup>

*Limitations of the New Historicist approach and a proposal for modification*

Though I use what is essentially a New Historicist model in the reading of the three texts taken up in this study, it is important to note the potential pitfalls inherent in a wholly functionalist approach. First, any model that discusses “literacy” or “literate tradition” as separate from “orality” or “oral tradition,” whether that model is functionalist or not, potentially helps to perpetuate the misperception that orality and literacy are mutually exclusive polar opposites, or that they accomplish the same thing in different ways. As I have already suggested above, such a model inevitably distorts our perception of a culture’s communicative methods and modes. Oral and literate traditions may exist for centuries alongside each other within a single culture, without one being subordinate to the other. In some cultures oral and literate traditions are used in different contexts to perform completely different tasks. A particular oral tradition thus may not be adequately replaced by a literate one. Other communicative traditions may require *both* oral and literate elements. To a certain extent, then, regardless of the flexibility of our model, the terms we use influence how we view the evidence: by using “oral” and “literate” we shape to some degree *how we are able to understand* particular activities.

Second, concepts such as “transition” (from oral to literate) and “interplay” (between oral and literate) lose some of their usefulness if the time periods are extended. New traditions born of the blending of oral and literate features are often not transitional or subordinate to oral or literate traditions *per se* but have a significant cultural value of their own. Consider Joyce Coleman’s (1996) study of the role of public readings in medieval England. Though reading was frequently done in private, it was often *preferable* to participate in the communal activity of hearing a work read aloud, even when one was capably literate and had easy access to written texts. Arguably, the concept of “transition” does not fit these circumstances.

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<sup>56</sup> Boyarin 1995, 14.

Third, orality and literacy do not exist on a continuum in the same way that dusk and dawn can be said to exist on a continuum where day and night represent opposite poles.<sup>57</sup> If we compare two pieces of text and conclude that text A has more oral characteristics than text B, and place the two on an orality/literacy continuum, we create the semblance of a “relationship” between the two texts where such a relationship may not exist. A text with more literate characteristics than oral characteristics is not necessarily composed or used in a more literate environment than a text with more oral characteristics, or vice versa. An “oral text” might be composed or used in a literate environment. Furthermore, if we attempt to place a text on an orality/literacy continuum, we may overlook its primary function within a given environment. It is possible that the text does not suggest a particular transition or interplay between oral and literate characteristics at all but, rather, purposefully manipulates oral and literate traditions in order to perform a particular task or achieve a particular goal. For example, as I argue in the following chapters, a text’s function within a particular environment may rest on the audience’s fluency within a particular oral tradition; a primary meaning of the written text may thus be idiomatic, signaling the oral-traditional context in which the text is used or composed. A written text may thus reflect the *interdependency* of oral and literate communicative modes in a particular time and place.<sup>58</sup>

Fourth, even if, as the New Historicists contend, we cannot isolate literacy (or oral tradition) from its social context and study it as an independent phenomenon, it does not follow that a study of literacy (or oral tradition) *within* its social context will be more illuminating. Ultimately, the effects of environmental circumstances on literacy are difficult to identify, let alone measure; we must be cautious in our conclusions about what a text may or may not say about its environment, literate or otherwise.

Finally, despite recent attempts to define “literacy” and “oral tradition,” our current definitions are not ideal for detailed, comparative cross-cultural analysis. We

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<sup>57</sup> Niditch (1996) uses the term “continuum” to describe the relative oral or literate aspects of texts in relation to each other. For various reasons, the term can be misleading.

<sup>58</sup> See the appendix to this study, which considers how a text’s mode may suggest its function in a particular environment.

cannot easily study orality and literacy themselves because they do not remain constant for any extended period of time in forms that we can examine and compare meaningfully to other forms. Instead, “orality” and “literacy” are over-simplified representations of concepts derived from a binary model that is useful for organizing information gleaned from human experience but limited in its capacity to support a more nuanced understanding of human experience itself. Even when we parse out orality and literacy in terms of activity and mode,<sup>59</sup> we still have a set of rather rigid categories. In the same way that a series of still images gives us an incomplete understanding of how a dancer moves across a stage, a study of literacy or orality at fixed points in time gives us an incomplete understanding of how either “moves” in relation to its social and cultural environment, or in relation to the other. What we need is a model that enables us to consider the movement between these still images. What is the relationship *between* literate and oral traditions in evidence in a particular text? How does this particular blend serve the author’s purpose? How does the discourse between literate and oral traditions in the text reflect human discourse in the cultural environment?

Ultimately, what we seek for our comparative analysis of hidden resistance in text is not “literacy” or “oral culture.” These terms refer to what is really a range of communication *modes* that exhibit traits that we associate with literacy and orality. While a communicative mode may incorporate both literate and oral elements to varying degrees, to conclude that a text or tradition is “more oral” or “more literate” than another does not indicate how—or how well—it will function in a particular context. Separate oral and literate ingredients do not add up to a particular mode, or to a particular capability; the value and application of a communicative mode is not a function of the sum of its constituent parts. Rather, it is precisely in the unique interaction of the oral and the literate within the context of a unique and dynamic social environment that the function of a particular mode is realized. I argue in this study that it is in this unique interaction between the oral and literate elements of a text that subversive sentiments can be successfully disguised from an undesirable audience even as they are shared clandestinely among like-minded individuals.

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<sup>59</sup> See the appendix to this study.

### Writing, meaning, and the culture of hidden resistance

Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites.

– Scott 1990, 136

When we write, we make meaning in several ways. First, the act of writing transforms the writing surface, which now has meaning as a surface with something written on it, as opposed to a potential writing surface (which may have meaning only to the one seeking a writing surface), or as a writing surface that is blank (which may suggest, among other things, unrealised opportunity). Second, the physical form that writing takes—its placement and its presentation—also has meaning. This meaning might be innocuous (a word at the top of an otherwise blank page might signify the beginning of an unfinished thought) or magnificent (the initial letter of an illuminated Bible prepares us for the first words of God); it might be sinister (the letter branded onto the skin of a slave) or mischievous (the graffiti painted on the gymnasium wall just out of reach of the janitor's mop). In each case, meaning depends not on the relationship between written symbol and abstract concept *per se* but on the intention of the author and the interpretation of the reader. Where a brand has one meaning for the slave, it has a wholly different meaning for the slave owner. Graffiti may symbolize resistance for the graffiti artist, but it is a headache for the janitor and a real cost for the property owner.

Third, writing creates a relationship between the signifier (i.e., the writing) and the signified (i.e., the ideas, objects or actions that the written symbol represents). This relationship is multifaceted and dynamic—a written symbol can signify many concepts at once and can be used by the writer or interpreted by the reader to signify something in addition to (or completely other than) its denotative meaning. The meaning of a written word is limited only by the imagination of the individual who imbues the written word with meaning.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> A good example of such multifaceted meaning of the written word is the name “Haman” in modern Judaism. In the Book of Esther, Haman is the manipulative adviser to the King Ahasuerus. After a

When we write, we effectively *capture* an abstract concept and *transform* it into a concrete representation of that concept. Writing as an activity thus suggests a certain power over one's surroundings. The very nature of the writing act—the “capturing” and “transforming” of an abstract concept—can be seen as a violent one.<sup>61, 62</sup> It should not be surprising, then, the scholarly argument that writing and text have played key roles in the maintenance, attainment and appropriation of social and political power.

If we look for deterministic “consequences” of writing, we tend to seek big movement, big transformation. We might look for the written word as a herald of political or social change—as a “tool of the tyrant”<sup>63</sup> (Egyptian *stelai* erected in conquered territories, for example, or propaganda produced by Nazi Germany) or as a “weapon of the weak,”<sup>64</sup> helping to galvanize support for a political or social cause (as arguably it did in the Reformation, the French Revolution and in Nazi-occupied

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public humiliation, for which he blames Mordechai, a Jew, Haman convinces the king to order the death of all the Jews in the kingdom. Queen Esther points out that the king has effectively decreed the death of his own wife, as Esther herself is Jewish. Livid, the king orders that Haman be hanged from the gallows he had built for the Jews. Today, Jews celebrate Purim to remember the story of Esther. In the context of the holiday, “Haman” is not only the name of a biblical figure but also the metaphorical representation of greed, cunning, cruelty and evil. Another meaning of “Haman” is observable only from within the oral-traditional culture of contemporary Judaism. Every Purim, the Book of Esther is read aloud in large gatherings. When the name “Haman” is voiced, it is greeted with a chorus of jeers, foot-stomping and noisemakers. This meaning of “Haman,” so widely understood today, is not written anywhere in the text. The earliest descriptions of Purim from the Second Temple period emphasize solemn observance; not until several centuries later, with the sage advice of Rava in the Babylonian Talmud (c. 550-600 CE), do we find what is generally seen in part as the basis for what would later become a much less solemn occasion: “A man is obligated to get drunk on Purim to the point where he can no longer distinguish between ‘Cursed is Haman’ and ‘Blessed is Mordechai’” (Megillah 7b).

<sup>61</sup> Goody (1977) points to the violence inherent in the act of rendering a spoken word into written form, shifting language from an aural to a visual form. Svenbro (1988) points out that the interaction between author and audience was understood to be power-laden by the Greeks, who wrote of the pederastic relationship between writer and reader.

<sup>62</sup> The reading act can be as forcibly transformative as the act of writing, especially if we consider the power of the reader to *read into* the written word a meaning that the writer did not initially intend. In situations of domination, a “violent,” transformative reading of what might otherwise be seen as a “fixed” text can serve to bolster political resistance, or even serve as a form of political resistance in and of itself. As Scott (1990) pointedly observes about the meaning of Exodus in the antebellum South, “astute slaveowners undoubtedly realized that the attention to Joshua and Moses in slave Christianity had something to do with their prophetic roles as liberators of the Israelites from bondage. But, since they were, after all, Old Testament Prophets, slaves could hardly be punished for revering them as part of their—authorized—Christian faith” (158).

<sup>63</sup> See Steiner's *Tyrant's Writ* (1994), an investigation into the use of writing by those in power in the ancient world.

<sup>64</sup> See Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985).

France<sup>65</sup>). But when we look for big consequences, we risk overlooking the more ideological “quiet narrative” of literacy. We may miss the function of writing in the day-to-day life of an individual who exists in a time and place where social and political changes are not overt, where open revolt or rebellion are neither possible nor desirable, but where it may still be distasteful to silently and willingly accept the *status quo* without expressing resistance at all.

Such oversight is understandable: When writing is used as a tool of the tyrant or as a weapon of the weak in politically charged situations, the results are often exciting, eclipsing less dynamic expressions of resistance. In these circumstances, writing can be used as an agent in the transformation of human society in profound (and frequently violent) ways. Writing as quiet resistance, by comparison, is not very sexy. But open rebellion and full-scale revolution against oppression are relatively rare events in human history.<sup>66</sup> They are poor settings for exploring how writing shapes an individual’s everyday resistance to social and political pressures in those long intervals during which revolution and open rebellion are not part of daily reality.

Yet while the function of writing and the character of literacy are likely unique to the cultural context they inhabit, we must isolate at least a few variables in order to make meaningful cross-cultural comparisons. James Scott (1990) faces a similar challenge in his comparative study of power relationships: Because the character of each political conflict is unique to a particular set of environmental and social circumstances, when Scott attempts to isolate elements for comparison he risks flattening out the very uniqueness of the phenomenon he wishes to study. He justifies his approach with an argument that is also appropriate to this study: “While I do believe that close contextual work is the lifeblood of theory, I also believe there is something useful to be said across cultures and historical epochs when our focus is narrowed by structural similarities. The analytical strategy pursued here thus begins with the premise that structurally similar forms of domination will bear a family

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. French playwright Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* (1942), which transformed the classic Greek play into a subversive political commentary on Nazi power.

<sup>66</sup> See Scott 1990.

resemblance to one another.”<sup>67</sup> As an example, Scott points out that “the extraction of labor or grain from a subordinate population has something of a generic quality to it,” while “the shape of personal domination is likely to be far more culturally specific and particular.”<sup>68</sup> Scott clarifies that he does not mean that “slaves, serfs, untouchables, the colonized, and subjugated races share immutable characteristics” but, rather, that “to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are also broadly comparable.”<sup>69</sup>

In this study, I argue that “structurally similar forms of literacy” will also bear a “family resemblance.” I do not propose that we will find broad cultural similarities among the rabbinic sages who recorded the Babylonian Talmud, the oral-traditional poets of ancient Greece and the Catholic disenfranchised of eighteenth-century Ireland. But insofar as all three groups navigated environments that limited how they could express their political views, we can recognize common features in the way they employed writing to disguise subversive ideas. It is not the texts themselves that exhibit similarities to each other.<sup>70</sup> Rather, it is the *relationships between text and subtext* that are similar. I argue that one of the key functions of all three texts is to convey a concealed message to a particular audience—a function that depends on each author’s ability to manipulate what Scott calls the “hidden transcript” of a primarily oral-traditional culture within the confines of the “public transcript” of written record. It is the author’s dexterity in both oral and literate traditions that enables him or her to disguise and deliver this message, and it is the audience’s fluency in both traditions that determines whether or not it understands the subtext of the written piece.<sup>71</sup> In the cases of all three texts examined in this study, fluency in a particular oral-traditional “language” is necessary for complete understanding of

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<sup>67</sup> Scott 1990, x.

<sup>68</sup> Scott 1990, 112.

<sup>69</sup> Scott 1990, xi.

<sup>70</sup> Arguably the texts examined in this study could not be more different in character: the first is a collection of rabbinic conversations and interpretations of law, the second is an epic poem thought to be the written version of an oral-traditional account of historical events, and the third is a novel.

<sup>71</sup> While it is possible to assess to some degree the success of a subtext’s disguise, it is often much more difficult to know how successfully it was “decoded” or received by the intended audience.

the subtext.<sup>72</sup> The hidden message exists in the intersection of orality and literacy; full understanding of the message requires fluency in both oral and literate traditions—and, in fact, a fluency in the particular blend of oral and literate traditions that make up the disguise. Thus, meaning is dependent on the relationship between the oral and the literate.

*Scott's model of the hidden transcript*

Conformity is far too lame a word for the active manipulation of rituals of subordination to turn them to good personal advantage; it is an art form in which one can take some pride at having successfully misrepresented oneself.

– Scott 1990, 33

In the 1970s and 1980s, James Scott studied power structures and patterns of rebellion in Southeast Asia. He presented his observations in a series of books that progressively extended his ideological theory about the everyday forms of resistance used by subordinate populations. The first of the three studies, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), compares (overt) rebellion with (covert) alternatives to rebellion among the Malay peasantry. In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), Scott emphasizes the relative importance of hidden or disguised forms of resistance to the political life of “relatively powerless groups” (again using evidence from the Malay peasant communities but also extending his ideas to include subordinate groups more generally). These covert forms of resistance might include “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, [and] sabotage,”<sup>73</sup> among other things. He points out that our historical understanding of resistance to domination is skewed to focus primarily on those violent struggles commonly associated with peasant uprising and rebellion. Our “tendency to assign greater historical priority and weight to the organized and political than to everyday resistance ... fundamentally misconstrues the very basis of economic and political

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<sup>72</sup> John Miles Foley (1999) argues that “oral traditions work like languages, only more so” in that they are idiomatic and referential; the degree to which one understands the meaning of an oral tradition depends on the degree to which one is familiar with its cultural context. See Chapter 2 in this study for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>73</sup> Scott 1985, 29.

struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes—not just the peasantry—in repressive settings.”<sup>74</sup> *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) extends his theory to account for what Scott argues are patterns common to all communities—rural and urban, contemporary and historical—that are characterized by a marked differentiation between dominant and subordinate groups. The relationship between dominant and subordinate populations, suggests Scott, can be understood as being shaped by (and within) the *public transcript* and the *hidden transcript*. He uses *public transcript* as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” and adds that “the public transcript, when it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations.”<sup>75</sup> The hidden transcript, on the other hand, “[characterizes] discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.”<sup>76</sup> Though here Scott defines “hidden transcript” in relation to what is clearly a subordinate group keen to hide its actions and conversations from “powerholders,” elsewhere in the book Scott clarifies that all groups participate in creating and maintaining both a public transcript and a hidden transcript, and that there are likely several public and hidden transcripts within a given community.<sup>77</sup>

Rebellion and revolution represent simply “the most explosive realm of politics” or “the rupture of the political *cordon sanitaire* between the hidden and the public transcript”—defined by the moment an individual openly defies his oppressors and the subordinate role he has been assigned.<sup>78</sup> The great bulk of political discourse of the subordinate group takes place wholly out of earshot of the dominant, in a setting where the subordinate is free to share his dissatisfaction and desire for change with

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<sup>74</sup> Scott 1985, 450.

<sup>75</sup> Scott 1990, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Scott 1990, 5. We can better understand these terms (and lessen the potentially confusing use of “transcript” in an investigation that considers writing and literacy) if we think of Scott’s public transcript as a “public face,” and his hidden transcript as a “hidden face.”

<sup>77</sup> A tendency toward self-contradiction is one of the more vexing aspects of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Cf. Gal (1995, 413): “It is a general and irritating characteristic of the book that Scott often denies in one place a point he has demonstrably asserted in another.”

<sup>78</sup> Scott 1990, 18-19.

like-minded individuals in relative safety. It is this offstage, hidden transcript that provides what biblical scholar Richard Horsley dubs the “nurturing matrix of bolder forms of resistance.”<sup>79</sup> Scott observes that “[i]t would be more accurate, in short, to think of the hidden transcript as a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it.”<sup>80</sup> An absence of clear evidence of political resistance to domination within a particular community does not necessarily indicate the absence of resistance. Rather, resistance expressed outside of the public transcript fuels the events we more commonly associate with resistance, namely, open conflict and rebellion. But it is Scott’s third identified form of subordinate political discourse that serves as the theoretical framework for this investigation, namely, the discourse that occurs when elements of the hidden transcript find their way into the public transcript in a masked or camouflaged form: this “politics of disguise and anonymity ... takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors.”<sup>81</sup>

The hidden transcript of the subordinate group is not limited to verbal discourse. Scott identifies several actions that he considers to be representative of subordinate resistance. These actions may include, but are not limited to, “poaching, pilfering, clandestine tax evasion, and intentionally shabby work for landlords.”<sup>82</sup> Both discourse and action may find their way into the public transcript, in various forms and in various degrees of camouflage. Being able to identify concealed or disguised subordinate discourse and action within the public transcript can offer us what might be the only insight into the character of historical resistance to power that is not wholly muffled by the public transcript—a transcript that is shaped and maintained in large part by discourses and practices determined by the dominant group:

By recognizing the guises that the powerless must adopt outside the safety of the hidden transcript, we can, I believe, discern a political dialogue with power in the public transcript. If this assertion can be sustained, it is significant insofar as the hidden transcript of many historically important subordinate groups is irrecoverable for all practical purposes. What is often available, however, is what they have been able to introduce in muted or veiled form into

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<sup>79</sup> Horsley 2004a, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Scott 1990, 191 (emphasis in original).

<sup>81</sup> Scott 1990, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Scott 1990, 14.

the public transcript. What we confront, then, in the public transcript, is a strange kind of ideological debate about justice and dignity in which one party has a severe speech impediment induced by power relations. If we wish to hear this side of the dialogue we shall have to learn its dialect and codes. Above all, recovering this discourse requires a grasp of the arts of political disguise.<sup>83</sup>

Scott's perspective provides support for the New Historicist approach undertaken in this investigation, which demands that texts be considered within the context of the cultures that produce them. Like literacy and writing, resistance embedded within the public transcript must also be considered in light of its social, political and cultural environment, not examined in isolation. If the character of literacy is shaped by environment, and if writing is used to disguise resistance to domination, then context will also determine *the manner of the disguise*.

#### *Criticism of Scott's model*

While Scott's model offers new insights into resistance discourse among subordinate groups, it has been criticized by anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, among others, for its imprecision, its overly exclusive and overly dismissive language, and its tendency to oversimplify the nature of hegemony and the relationship(s) between the subordinate and the dominant. Scott anticipates at least some of this criticism. He does not dismiss the importance of theory based on "close, contextual work" but suggests that making broad generalizations from detailed fieldwork enables comparison of structural similarities "across cultures and historical epochs."<sup>84</sup> While his approach may illuminate similarities, however, it can also be distortive. Reviewer Susan Gal (1995) laments: "Scott flattens the great range of power relations evident in the diverse social formations of the historical and ethnographic record into a single opposition between dominant and subordinate," effectively "[e]ffacing the historical and cultural differences between the situations of groups such as 18<sup>th</sup>-century American slaves, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian peasants, and late-20<sup>th</sup>-century workers in former Communist states." It is difficult not to agree

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<sup>83</sup> Scott 1990, 138.

<sup>84</sup> Scott 1990, x.

with Gal that “there are important sociological reasons for not conflating so many different forms of political and economic domination.”<sup>85</sup>

While I do not agree that Scott’s ideas are “deeply flawed,”<sup>86</sup> the hidden transcript model presented in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* must be handled cautiously. Scott’s tendency to ignore the differences between cultures in order to focus on the similarities means that he risks seeing similarities where they may not actually exist, or where the explanation for the similarity may not be immediately apparent. Though “structurally similar forms of domination” may “bear a family resemblance to one another,” resemblance does not necessarily indicate any profound commonality or genetic relationship.<sup>87</sup> It is possible that two forms of domination may *seem* to bear a family resemblance, but not be structurally similar at all, or be similar in only very limited or superficial ways.<sup>88</sup> A comparative analysis of “structurally similar” forms of domination should take into account structural and environmental differences as well, in order to contextualize the similarities in a meaningful way. Otherwise, the similarities lack context, and we increase the risk of misinterpreting the evidence gleaned from our comparative analysis.

Second, many of the terms Scott uses are “undertheorized”<sup>89</sup> and require clearer definition.<sup>90</sup> For example, he does not adequately define what he means by “hidden”

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<sup>85</sup> Gal 1995, 415.

<sup>86</sup> Gal 1995, 407.

<sup>87</sup> Scott’s wishy-washy diction serves to confuse the issue further. The statement “structurally similar forms of domination will bear a family resemblance to one another” could be interpreted, rather meaninglessly, as “structurally similar forms of domination will look similar to one another.” I have presumed for the sake of argument that Scott intends, rather, something akin to “structurally similar forms of domination will bear other resemblances to each other as well.”

<sup>88</sup> A simple example based loosely on Darwin’s evolutionary model serves to illustrate the point. A species of moth may over time evolve to display a colour that camouflages it from predators. A species of wolf may over time evolve to display a colour that camouflages it from its prey. We might argue that both species evolved in a manner that was best suited to their survival. But this “structural similarity” serves to camouflage the fact that one is prey, and the other is predator, and that each plays a very different role within its respective ecosystem. In other words, “the common structure, when it can be demonstrated, cannot be explained in terms of a shared history, but rather leads to a consideration of the processes of formation of the two forms and of what these processes may themselves have held in common” (Renfrew 1979, 24). A mathematician addresses the “phenomenon of equivalences” in this way: “Regularities and repetitions in patterns at once suggest to a modern mathematician the *abstract groups* behind the patterns, and the various *transformations* of one problem, not necessarily mathematical, into another again spell *group* and raise the question, *what, if anything remains the same, or invariant, under all these transformations?* In technical phrase, what are the *invariants* of the *group of transformations?*” (Bell 1951, 95, cited in Renfrew 1979, 27. Emphasis in original).

<sup>89</sup> Gal 1995, 409.

and “public.”<sup>91</sup> According to Scott, the hidden transcript of dominant and subordinate groups includes practices as well as discourse. Where practices within the hidden transcript of the subordinate may range anywhere from “foot-dragging” to poaching, the hidden transcript of the dominant group might include “clandestine luxury and privilege, surreptitious use of hired thugs, bribery, and tampering with land titles.”<sup>92</sup> In each case, says Scott, these practices “contravene the public transcript of the party in question”—that is, they are not officially accepted as representative of the public order—and are, for the most part, “kept offstage and unavowed.”<sup>93</sup> This description leaves many questions unanswered: What is the difference between “clandestine” luxury and privilege (part of the dominant “hidden transcript”) and undisguised luxury and privilege (part of the dominant public transcript, and certainly not uncommon in societies that are structured along strong dominant/subordinate lines) within the context of Scott’s theory? What criteria determine which luxuries and privileges are hidden and which are public? If a luxury is not directly referenced in a publicly displayed text or piece of artwork (each presumably a fairly clear representation of the public transcript), do we presume that it is “hidden”? From whom is a luxury or privilege hidden? For whom is it public? One might argue that there are many luxuries and privileges enjoyed by particular members of a dominant group who are far more concerned about hiding the fact that they enjoy these privileges *from other members of the dominant group* rather than from members of the subordinate population. How do we know which hidden transcript a particular luxury or privilege belongs to?<sup>94</sup> In a similar vein, we could ask how it is ever possible that “intentionally shabby work for landlords” on the part

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<sup>90</sup> Among these terms (aside from “hidden” and “public,” which are discussed here) are some of the most frequently used terms in the text: “dominant,” “subordinate” and “infrapolitics.” Writes Gal (1995, 409), “The major analytical categories he uses—dominant and subordinate—are so broadly generalized over space and time that important cultural differences between forms of power cannot be captured in his scheme.”

<sup>91</sup> See Gal’s (1995) thoughtful linguistic analysis of Scott’s use of the term “public.”

<sup>92</sup> Scott 1990, 14.

<sup>93</sup> Scott 1990, 14.

<sup>94</sup> The same could be asked more particularly of a hidden transcript of resistance. A transcript of resistance need not simply be hidden from the dominant group. One might wish to hide a transcript of subversion or resistance from one’s peers if engaging in such a transcript openly amongst them might invite repudiation or denouncement, or otherwise pose a danger. See Chapter 1, in which I consider briefly the possibility that some transcripts in the Talmud may have been hidden by members of the rabbinic academy from other members of the academy, or other academies.

of the subordinate could be “kept offstage and unavowed.”<sup>95</sup> Presumably Scott means that the *intention* to produce shabby work is what the subordinate hides from his landlord, not the shabby work itself. It would seem, in fact, that the whole point of “intentionally shabby work” is its intentionality: It is meant to be public—that is, publicly viewed as a part of the publicly expected or accepted relationship between dominant and subordinate. If the dominant expects that the subordinate will produce “shabby work,” and the subordinate does then indeed produce shabby work, then the dominant’s role is justified (“These subordinates need someone to keep them on track; that’s where I come in”); the subordinate, on the other hand, by producing intentionally shabby work, is able to continue to “voice” his dissatisfaction—and to share this dissatisfaction in a public way, with subordinate and dominant alike (“Any dominance over me is limited; I am still in charge of what I produce”). These ambiguities muddy Scott’s discussion.

Scott points out that there are many “hidden transcripts”: dominant and subordinate groups alike engage in communication that is hidden from the other group. There are likely many “public transcripts” as well, depending on the occasion and the social and political circumstances. But the theory Scott outlines implies that the *most clearly delineated* interactions between “hidden” and “public” correspond to those transcripts concealed from or shared between dominant and subordinate groups. Thus *the* public transcript is the collectively accepted version of appropriate social interactions, beliefs, values and roles within the public sphere. *The* hidden transcript is collectively the social interactions, beliefs, values and roles that group members share only amongst themselves and not with members of another group. This model is not nearly complex enough to account for the hidden and public elements that characterize all interactions between any two individuals or groups in any social system. Ultimately, we can speak of a particular discourse or action as being hidden *from someone*, but to speak of whole transcripts (as Scott defines them) as being “hidden” or “public” does not provide enough nuance for our analysis of power relationships and modes of resistance communication within particular communities.

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<sup>95</sup> Scott 1990, 14.

It is frequently difficult to determine whether a piece of evidence provided as an example by Scott is part of a hidden transcript or part of the public transcript. This is due in part to Scott's imprecision, but it is also the case that not all historical evidence is so easily categorized as part of a hidden or public transcript. A public inscription, for example, might present a widely socially accepted rendition of history. The graffiti painted on that public inscription may also present to some extent a "public transcript" of the social environment. However, much of the graffiti's meaning is "hidden" from, or unrecognized by, the general population. Thus, a single artefact might have one meaning as part of the public transcript and another as part of a hidden transcript.

A transcript that is hidden or public at a particular time need not *remain* hidden or public. In fact, an element of the hidden transcript of one time period may become part of the public transcript at a later time period. For example, Flavius Josephus arguably wrote his account of the Judean rebellion for an elite Roman audience.<sup>96</sup> But as his writing became widely available to a more diverse audience, at one point it became part of the public transcript of both Roman and Jewish history. The inherent flexibility of Scott's transcript model also increases the potential for ambiguity.

Third, Scott's observations are too frequently limited to a very narrowly defined realm of interaction—the face-to-face encounter. He glosses over the ideological implications of communication modes not mediated by personal interaction.<sup>97</sup> In doing so, he risks minimizing what Benedict Anderson's (1983) evaluation of nationalism and Brian Stock's (1983) analysis of the "textual community" both acknowledge: that a sense of community, identification with a "common cause" and a "common culture," and the sense of a shared purpose that develops out of common experience are not dependent on face-to-face communication. Nor does a commonly

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<sup>96</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*. Josephus was sent to Judea by the Emperor Vespasian to document the war, which began in 66 CE.

<sup>97</sup> That is, most of the interactions he examines include some type of face-to-face communication, whether between two (or more) subordinates, two (or more) dominants, or subordinate(s) and dominant(s). While he briefly acknowledges those elements of the public transcript that do not necessarily demand face-to-face interaction between individuals (e.g., the public display of inscriptions), he does not examine the ideological implications of these elements *as separate from* the ideological implications of the face-to-face interaction.

held desire for resistance against a dominant force necessarily depend on personal interactions among the subordinate group—or even between the subordinate and the dominant. In contemporary society, for example, print, radio, television and film all contribute to our self-identification as members of a particular community,<sup>98</sup> even though it is unlikely that we will ever engage in face-to-face interaction with more than a few members of that community. These non-personal forms of communication have been instrumental in the evolution of social resistance. Yet, as Gal (1995) eloquently points out, “Scott’s book describes a barely recognizable landscape in which it often appears that 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers did not read broadsheets, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century peasants, workers, and post-Communists are not profoundly influenced by listening to radio, watching television, or playing cassette recorders.”<sup>99</sup> While Gal limits her criticism to Scott’s distortion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we could also argue that limiting a study of social resistance in historical or ancient societies to what we can ascertain about face-to-face interactions (or, alternatively, not adequately assessing the ideological implications of non-personal communication) may be similarly misleading.<sup>100</sup>

Fourth, in laying out a model of social resistance via the use of hidden transcripts, Scott overstates his case. According to Scott, rather than focusing on overt forms of resistance—that is, “public” struggle—we should consider the practical forms of “everyday resistance,” or the covert struggles that occur on a daily basis. It is in the “hidden transcript” of the subordinate group that we will find the roots of more overt displays of dissatisfaction, even revolution and rebellion. But this is unreasonable, argues Latin American scholar Matthew Gutmann: “That covert forms of struggle may in certain, even many, historical circumstances be more frequent does not mean that overt forms should no longer be studied. Besides, the emphasis here is wrong; it

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<sup>98</sup> For example, a community that listens to the Vinyl Café on CBC Radio, a community that reads the Bible, a community that watches *CSI*, a community that buys the *Globe and Mail*, or even a “community” of Canadians.

<sup>99</sup> Gal 1995, 415.

<sup>100</sup> It should also be noted here that this study, too, is admittedly limited in its focus to how resistance is disguised in *text*. I do not consider how resistance may be disguised in the visual arts (except as text appears visually on a writing surface), how resistance may be disguised in song, or how resistance may be disguised in other popular culture forms. Presumably such avenues of investigation would prove comparably rich in possibilities, and this brief study would not suffice to explore them. Such is a task for another day.

is not a question of overt or covert in isolation; rather ... these forms occur together, alternate, and transform themselves into each other."<sup>101</sup> However important Scott's hidden transcript is in the evolution of social resistance, "marvelous events remain to be explained: rebellions *do* occur, and resistance *does* become overt."<sup>102</sup> A model of social resistance that downplays the significance of open rebellion, as a physical event or as an ideological symbol, presents a distorted picture of human experience. A study that examines open *or* hidden resistance without reflecting on the relationship between the two *in context* risks misconstruing the meaning afforded a resistance activity by the individual actors themselves: "Far from needing to narrow our understanding of which forms of resistance are worthwhile to study, we must study both overt and covert forms and the relations between them."<sup>103</sup>

While we may be able, as Scott argues, to say "something useful ... across cultures and historical epochs when our focus is narrowed by structural similarities,"<sup>104</sup> if we isolate the resistance event or action from its social context, we give it *new* meaning: Now its primary "usefulness" is, perhaps, that it conveniently proves Scott's argument. But as Gutmann points out, "not all societies suffer the same conditions, and even in others that do the consequences are not necessarily as uniform as [Scott] would have us believe."<sup>105</sup> Where Scott states that "infrapolitics" (that is, the kind of covert or disguised responses to subjugation characterized in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*) can be thought of as the "foundational" form of politics and that, "under the conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live, it *is* political life,"<sup>106</sup> Gutmann argues that popular protest in recent decades in Latin America suggests a different foundation, reflecting "an

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<sup>101</sup> Gutmann 1993, 77. In fact, in his desire to dismantle the "overly romanticized model of popular resistance" (Gutmann 1993, 78), which casts resistance primarily in terms of violent rebellion by only those "foolhardy" enough to transgress the limits of the social system (Scott 1985, 247), Scott promotes another deterministic model: the long-suffering peasant, resigned to the *status quo* even as he exploits his social role to make a "political" statement (Scott 1985, 1990).

<sup>102</sup> Gutmann 1993, 78.

<sup>103</sup> Gutmann 1993, 76.

<sup>104</sup> Scott 1990, x.

<sup>105</sup> Gutmann 1993, 81.

<sup>106</sup> 1990, 201.

awareness of the risks of organizing against elite classes ... [but also] a determination to organize and transform rather than simply to cope."<sup>107</sup>

Finally, Scott frequently equates "everyday" with "hidden." In doing so, he underscores his assertion that open rebellion and revolution are relatively rare events in human history: If open rebellion and revolution are rare, then "everyday forms of resistance," if they occur, must be covert. But this juxtaposition is not logical: open protest need not take the form of rebellion and revolution, and not all "everyday forms of resistance" are hidden. Much depends on a) the nature of the dominant group's toleration of protest and b) the resistance options and strategies open to the subordinate group in a particular time and place. Consider, for example, Gandhi's peaceful rejection of British imperialism. It is difficult to conceive of the non-cooperation movement (characterized by the principles of civil disobedience and *ahimsa* [non-violence] and the boycott of British goods, institutions and honours) as akin to open "rebellion" or "revolution" as described by Scott (who tends to lump the two together and imply that both are violent). Though Gandhi's efforts would come to an abrupt and bloody conclusion with the 1922 uprising in Chauri Chaura, the Mahatma inspired a form of resistance that was not hidden and yet was not revolutionary or rebellious in the manner of Scott's model. At the same time, simply because a form of resistance is aggressive or violent does not mean it is not also an "everyday form of resistance." The form that resistance takes indicates the expectations of the protestors, the social environment and the tools available to those who resist, and cannot easily be predicted using Scott's model of dominant/subordinate relationships. As Gutmann argues, "just as the existence of a proletariat in Latin America does not automatically lead to proletarian or any other kind of revolution, neither does the existence of superordinate classes imply any particular form of resistance on the part of *los de abajo* [the ones from below]."<sup>108</sup>

Scott's theory of hidden transcripts and everyday resistance thus suffers from oversimplification on several levels. He draws too strong a dividing line between the dominant and the subordinate; by conflating different social systems to fit this

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<sup>107</sup> Gutmann 1993, 81.

<sup>108</sup> Gutmann 1993, 86.

scheme, he implies “that the subordinate and the dominant are always clearly definable, unified, and separable groups, unambiguously opposed to each other.”<sup>109</sup> He does not adequately explore the meaning of “hidden” and “public” in varying contexts, and though he pays lip service to the idea that there are many “transcripts,” he does not suggest how this might affect the dichotomy of public/hidden or dominant/subordinate.

Scott’s structuralism-inspired dichotomy has roots in Western concepts of philosophy, language and individuality.<sup>110</sup> He does not consider how linguistic, social and political ideologies themselves mediate the expression of the relationship between social power and resistance. Instead, he implies that different cultures express domination and subordination in similar ways, and that this leads to comparable social, political, linguistic and intellectual expressions. He does not adequately allow for the likelihood that various expressions unique to a particular culture will shape the representation of power in unique ways.<sup>111</sup>

#### *A response to Scott’s critics*

Yet despite the criticism it has attracted, Scott’s model encourages a re-evaluation of human power relationships and demands that we reconsider our definition of resistance and the manner in which resistance might be expressed. If we continue to define resistance in terms of rebellion and revolution, and if we continue to look for evidence of resistance only in places where we would expect to find it (that is,

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<sup>109</sup> Gal 1995, 417.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Gal 1995: “Timothy Mitchell (1990) has drawn attention to the way in which this master metaphor [of power and resistance] depends on our everyday (Western) conception of the person as an internally autonomous, self-formed consciousness living inside a physically manufactured body. This familiar dual notion of the person leads to the idea that power itself is dual: coercion is usually understood as an external force exercised on the body but not necessarily penetrating and controlling the mind, while persuasion is the mental mode by which power operates, one that captures the mind .... In contrast, Mitchell (1990, 546) follows Foucault in arguing that this dual, autonomous subject is itself “the effect of distinctively modern forms of power” (414).

<sup>111</sup> Again, we can return to a pseudo-scientific illustration of the potential problems with this equation: Many animals have evolved with wings, but not all of these animals fly. If we presume that the presence of wings means “this animal can fly,” we would be wrong. Likewise, if we presume that the presence of foot-dragging in one subordinate group has meaning similar to the presence of foot-dragging in another subordinate group, and we do not adequately consider the context of foot-dragging in each case, we risk misreading what might be profound differences in the circumstances, perspectives and ideology of the foot-draggers, and thus the meaning of their action.

during periods immediately before, during and after open conflict), we inject little new into the discussion of power and resistance, and we learn little more about individuals whose personal experiences are not generally well represented in the extant physical evidence of the public transcript. As biblical scholar Richard Horsley has pointed out, “In many academic fields it is common to think of social-political order and disorder in terms of simple alternatives. Either people accept and acquiesce in the established order or they protest and rebel. In the absence of rebellion, people are assumed to have been relatively content.”<sup>112</sup> Despite inconsistencies, gaps in argument and the limited range of data upon which it is based—not small criticisms, granted—Scott’s model challenges exactly that narrow view which Horsley laments. This is the intrinsic value of the hidden-transcripts model: it highlights fundamental shortcomings of traditional historical research and provides an alternative lens through which to view the concept of resistance to domination.

Scott’s critics decry his flattening of rich and diverse detail in order to create a model that is so widely applicable that it is, consequently, weak as an analytical tool. Others argue that Scott has over-generalized to such an extent that the model reflects no real-life culture at all. Yet Scott’s supporters consider the general nature of the model to be one of its primary strengths, enabling a cross-cultural, cross-epochal comparison that deepens our insight into the experience of the individual human and the nature of human experience.<sup>113</sup> Both arguments are valid: Scott’s model *is* too general, but it also affords us an opportunity to organize diverse qualitative and ethnographic data in such a manner that they can be compared in a meaningful way. How do we navigate the pitfalls inherent in Scott’s model and yet benefit from its potential usefulness as a comparative tool?

Guidance and insight come from what may seem to be an unlikely source. In their edited collection *Transformations: Mathematical Approaches to Culture Change* (1979), archaeologist Sir Colin Renfrew and mathematician Kenneth Cooke apply mathematical models in the analysis of archaeological data. By using models derived

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<sup>112</sup> Horsley 2004a, 7.

<sup>113</sup> See the discussion below for applications of Scott’s model by various scholars.

from known data sets, contributors (mathematicians and archaeologists alike) are able to visually represent, frequently with surprising accuracy, known trends in cultural evolution (including trends in political influence, settlement patterns across time and space and the spread of agricultural techniques, among others). By extending the models to incorporate new data sets, it is possible to predict cultural change that reflects the new variables. Renfrew justifies the mathematical analysis of diverse human phenomena by asserting the importance of generalization for understanding. He does not discount the importance of detail—on the contrary, the detail is fundamental to our understanding—but the detail must be viewed *in conjunction with* an overarching model that has been derived from the detail (a mathematical equation, for example), in order to achieve greater insight. Together, the detail and the model enable us to examine the past and to predict future change:

[T]he appropriate path to understanding is generalization, that is, the formulation of general relationships between events and between processes, of which specific individual occurrences and phenomena can be seen as concrete expressions or manifestations. This is not to deny the crucial importance of circumstantial detail, of the analysis of environment, and of the context of events, but to assert that the nub of explanation lies in the generalization ... which, when set beside that circumstantial detail, produces the pattern or the phenomenon which we are seeking to explain.<sup>114</sup>

All explanations of observed phenomena are essentially models: to explain a complex idea, we create a setting in which we can arrange our data so that they make sense. A religious model of God is as much a human construct as a scientific model of the Big Bang. We create terms of reference (“God,” the “Big Bang”) so that we can discuss ideas that we cannot directly experience or for which we do not have incontrovertible “evidence.” Even an electron or an enzyme, argues Renfrew, is a “theoretical [entity] deliberately formulated by research workers just as is white dwarf or black hole, all of them difficult to observe directly.”<sup>115</sup> The purpose of creating a model is not to dispense with detailed observation, but to consider the model alongside various data groups and continue to modify it until it accurately reflects what is common to all. We may never achieve this goal. Even if we were to

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<sup>114</sup> Renfrew 1979, 5-6.

<sup>115</sup> Renfrew 1979, 7.

develop a model that seemed to explain commonalities, there is no guarantee that our explanation is the “correct” explanation, or that we could use the model to predict future events or circumstances. In the study of history,

there are regularities which are evident, and others which investigation can easily reveal, yet the more general relationships and in particular the processes which have led to those regularities in form still largely elude us .... just as the biochemist today, for all the formidable success he has had in analyzing the chemical reactions of life, finds it difficult to predict the structure of more complex organisms, so we still find it difficult to use our insights into the workings of the human individual in order to make significant predictions about the behavior of human societies.<sup>116</sup>

But while the stated goal of a comparative historical analysis may be to better understand past human behaviour or to better predict future change, the *value* of the exercise is in the process itself: In studying the details, modifying the models, and comparing and analyzing the data, we deepen our understanding of our subject of study, which ultimately, in the case of this investigation, is not simply the social-resistance program of the rabbinic Jew, the application of textual disguise by the ancient Greek, or the subversion of a fictional Catholic peasant but, rather, the desire—arguably common to all human beings—to engage others in the communication of ideas. It is the nature of that desire, and the form in which that desire is expressed, that we compare when we consider resistance in different cultures.

*Scott's model applied by others: A brief review of recent scholarship*

In the past decade, some of the most thoughtful applications of Scott's model as a framework for understanding historical events have been undertaken by biblical and rabbinic studies scholars. We have little physical evidence for the biblical and rabbinic periods aside from those texts that make up what Scott would likely call the “public transcript,” that is, the socially accepted version of the cultural record (for example, the *Tanakh* or Hebrew Bible, the Pseudepigrapha, the rabbinic texts, the

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<sup>116</sup> Renfrew 1979, 6.

writings of Josephus and Philo, and the patristic literature).<sup>117</sup> We have almost nothing representative of the common man, let alone his “everyday resistance” to domination. Scott’s hidden-transcripts model encourages a new reading of old texts—for evidence of the “little tradition” shrouded in the shadow of the “great tradition.”<sup>118</sup>

Scott’s model also emphasizes how systems of domination may be supported as much by visual and symbolic representations of ideology as they are by brute force or superior administrative organization. This view encourages new readings of biblical and archaeological evidence. As Richard Horsley testifies, “New Testament studies, like the classics scholarship on which it depends, has been somewhat slow to realize the degree to which the Roman imperial order, particularly in the Greek cities, was maintained not by occupying troops and extensive bureaucracy but through the symbolic arrangement of public space, the presence of images, and the performance of rituals.”<sup>119</sup> Scott’s model encourages an analysis of social resistance in Roman Judaea, for example, not only through evidence of domination and subordination in those areas we traditionally might expect to find evidence of power relationships—namely, military action and bureaucratic structure—but also in those areas that reflect how rituals were performed, how language and symbolic representation were used and how people engaged and interacted in public spaces: “To state the possibilities bluntly: Just because Jesus does not lead an armed assault on the temple and the Roman garrison in Jerusalem does not mean that he was not engaged in a message and program of revolutionary change. And just because Paul did not organize attacks on Roman officials or the Roman slave system does not mean that he was a ‘social conservative’ with regard to the Roman imperial

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<sup>117</sup> See my discussion above on the difficulty of determining which transcript a piece of evidence might represent.

<sup>118</sup> Using Scott’s model to analyze the political relationships in ancient societies for which we have exceedingly limited evidence presents problems that differ from those we face when we use Scott’s model to interpret evidence from a contemporary culture, or from a society for which we have recent historical data from varied and diverse sources. See particularly the work of Kittredge (2004, discussed in this section), who outlines some of these problems in her reading of resistance in the New Testament representation of Paul. Neil Elliott (2004) also points to what he sees as significant differences between the primarily rural, *agrarian* peasant resistance analyzed by Scott and the political resistance found in ancient or historical *urban* communities—including Jewish and early Christian communities under imperial Rome.

<sup>119</sup> Horsley 2004a, 6.

order.”<sup>120</sup> Studies based on public-transcript sources do not, for the most part, reflect how Roman domination affected the Near Eastern population; “in effect [they perpetuate] the pretense of unanimity in the past.”<sup>121</sup> Horsley outlines the task faced by New Testament studies scholars “post-Scott”:

The first step [is] to discern whether [scholars’] sources provide a record of the public transcript (nearly all public inscriptions, coins, and most extant documents) or a record of the hidden transcript of the subordinated (e.g., Mark or Paul’s letters?) or a record of the hidden transcript of the dominant (e.g., Josephus’ *Life*?). Key would be a comparison between the public transcript and the hidden transcripts—or in the absence of the latter, a critical suspicion about the former—in order to discern the effects of domination on popular views and actions and the rich variety of modes of popular political resistance delineated in Scott’s ... types. And a little subtlety and sophistication with regard to language and gestures in grasping the difference between appearance and reality would help.<sup>122</sup>

Horsley does not offer criteria for discerning whether a particular source reflects the hidden transcript or the public transcript but leaves this determination up to the individual scholar. He argues, however, that a careful review of the extant literature with Scott’s theories in mind allows scholars to “immediately discern frustration and anger in text after text.”<sup>123</sup> This observation alone supports the usefulness of Scott’s model as an analytical tool. When the biblical texts are read with an eye (or in some cases an ear) for concealed discourse, a new world is revealed—in which, for example, Jesus engages in a continuous dialogue of political resistance despite the fact that he does not openly counsel or engage in revolt but instead urges his followers to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”<sup>124</sup>

It is not a far step from here to see how the texts of the Gospels themselves, once they are accepted as part of the public transcript of Christian society, might become vehicles for concealed hidden-transcript discourse as social circumstances change and as political resistance addresses new inequities and takes on new forms. In the section that follows, I summarize the work of three New Testament scholars who

<sup>120</sup> Horsley 2004a, 7.

<sup>121</sup> Horsley 2004a, 13.

<sup>122</sup> Horsley 2004a, 13.

<sup>123</sup> Horsley 2004a, 8.

<sup>124</sup> Mark 12:17; see the discussion below.

apply Scott's theories in their analysis of the Gospels and contemporaneous archaeological and historical evidence. I then consider how a rabbinic studies scholar applies the model in his analysis of Talmud. Herzog (2004) discerns a veiled discourse of resistance to Roman imperial power in the narrative of Mark. Elliott (2004) suggests that the social welfare-oriented economic practices engaged in by the Pauline congregations are the equivalent of Scott's everyday forms of resistance. Kittredge (2004) discusses the importance of historical reconstruction in an analysis of ancient textual sources for which we have little archaeological evidence. Her observations support the need for what Rubenstein (2003) calls an "ethnography" of the text. Only when we have situated the text within a specific (reconstructed) historical environment, Kittredge argues, can we hope to read it "against the grain" for evidence of a veiled or hidden transcript of resistance. Boyarin (1999) reads the rabbinic texts as an ongoing dialogue in response to contemporary social and political tension caused by friction between early Christian and existing Jewish ideologies. The meaning of this dialogue is not accessible unless the audience is familiar with the (oral-traditional) environment in which the Talmud is learned and transmitted.

*a) Herzog*

In his (2004) analysis of the *denarius* scenario in Mark 12:13-17, William Herzog uses Scott's hidden-transcripts model to tease out a reading of the text that places Jesus more squarely on the side of resistance to Roman imperialism. Herzog's Jesus does not "turn the other cheek," at least not without first denouncing his oppressors.

In the text, Jesus is challenged by a group of Pharisees and Herodians to answer questions about the lawfulness of Roman tribute. If he does not declare the tribute to be lawful, Jesus risks arrest for inciting disobedience:

13. And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Hero'di-ans, to catch him in *his* words.
14. And when they were come, they say unto him, "Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person [position] of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"

15. Shall we give, or shall we not give?" But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me?<sup>125</sup> bring me a penny, that I may see *it*.
16. And they brought *it*. And he saith unto them, Whose *is* this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's.
17. And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.<sup>126</sup>

Traditionally, argues Herzog, this exchange has been understood to mean that Jesus advised paying the tribute and, indeed, that paying the tribute was the "lawful" thing to do (that is, lawful according to Torah). After the destruction of the Second Temple, and faced with the prospect of living and working in non-Jewish settlements throughout the Roman Empire, the rabbis devised a series of guidelines—a social etiquette—intended to encourage the Jews' full participation as members of their host community while at the same time ensuring as deep a connection as possible to their history, their faith and their God. Jews were to follow the laws of their host community, pay its taxes, and fight in its wars, even if this meant taking up arms against other Jews. They were to participate in all aspects of community life that did not directly infringe on the laws set out in Torah.<sup>127</sup> Within this framework, the Pharisees and the Herodians who oppose Jesus in Mark 12 could argue that they were simply following the teachings of the sages: their non-resistance to the Romans—even their support of Roman imperial policy—was the proper conduct for a Jew who is a Roman subject. Jesus might be expected to support this line of reasoning; his advice to his followers to pay the Roman tribute arguably is in line with Jewish thought at the time and with later rabbinic teaching.

Herzog calls for a new reading of the passage, one that rejects the traditional interpretation of Jesus as a pacifist who counsels cooperation. When we interpret the passage in light of the hidden transcript that Jesus' cryptic response serves to disguise, we see that Jesus counsels exactly the *opposite* of cooperation—in a way that cannot be identified as resistance by those with the power to arrest him. First, reasons Herzog, "Jesus is not being asked to render a personal opinion but to speak

<sup>125</sup> The Revised Standard version uses "Why put me to the test?"

<sup>126</sup> King James, 1978 (Philadelphia, PA: National Publishing Company).

<sup>127</sup> See Dimont 2003 [1962], 117-22, his discussion of Jochanan b. Zakkai's academy at Jabneh, and the rules he and his followers formulated to ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

as a rabbi and interpreter of the Torah. More precisely, the question is: what does the Torah say about paying tribute to Caesar?"<sup>128</sup> Jesus cannot dodge the question, or his authority as a teacher of God's law is called into question. Herzog concludes that the "render to Caesar" answer is not simply a clever bit of evasion: "If it were, it would defeat its purpose as an update on the Torah for the age of Tiberius."<sup>129</sup> Herzog focuses on the political context: The Herodians and the Pharisees are trying to goad Jesus into revealing the hidden transcript of resistance to Roman rule, as that resistance expresses itself in opposition to the tribute.<sup>130</sup>

Second, Herzog addresses the case of Roman "tribute" as a particularly problematic one for the Jews, even more than the issue of Roman tax. A Jew may grumble about paying tax, but paying tax does not demand that he compromise his theological principles. The concept of "tribute," on the other hand, is a concession to Rome's supremacy, which challenges the Jewish belief that "God alone should rule Israel, a claim that excluded all other rulers, whether Roman, Herodian, or priestly."<sup>131</sup> This understanding of tribute is symbolically represented in the *denarius*: the coin was stamped with the profile of Tiberius's head, complete with the laurel crown of the Olympians and the inscription *Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus*, implying the divinity of both father (Augustus) and son (Tiberius): "Both the image and the epigram condemn the coin; it violates Deut 8:5 which forbids making any graven images of things on the earth, below the earth or in heaven. More importantly, the coin violates the first and the second commandments of the Decalogue. The coin is a living disavowal of the covenant found in Torah."<sup>132</sup> The *denarius*, then, was "no ordinary Roman coin" but "a piece of political propaganda that staked Rome's claim to rule the cosmos."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Herzog 2004, 51.

<sup>129</sup> Herzog 2004, 51.

<sup>130</sup> See Herzog 2004, 50-51.

<sup>131</sup> Herzog 2004, 53-54. Cf. Josephus, whose Judas of Galilee "[upbraids] his countrymen as cowards for consenting to pay tribute to the Romans and tolerating mortal masters, after having God as their lord" (*War* 2: 118).

<sup>132</sup> Herzog 2004, 55.

<sup>133</sup> Herzog 2004, 55.

As this “scene of political intrigue”<sup>134</sup> plays out, the Pharisees and Herodians’ blatant flattery of Jesus as a “true” teacher who is not influenced by “the person of men” puts Jesus in a tight spot: “Every seemingly complimentary reference raises the stakes by forcing Jesus to ‘save face’ before the crowd by opposing the payment of tribute”<sup>135</sup> (and thereby inviting his own arrest and execution). Jesus’ challengers’ use of the first-person plural gives them at the very least the *guise* of genuine fellowship (“Should *we* pay them, or should *we* not?”), allowing them to set the stage for Jesus’ downfall without actually seeming to. Even if the assembled crowd were aware of their dishonourable intentions, the only thing the Pharisees and Herodians have actually spoken aloud is, arguably, the truth: Jesus *is* uninfluenced by the person of men and truly teaches the ways of God.

Jesus turns the tables on his opponents by revealing the differences between himself and the Pharisees and Herodians, in both ideology and practice. First, he demonstrates that he does not have a *denarius* on him but that the Pharisees and the Herodians do, or at least are able to procure one in short order. Second, by asking whose image is on the coin, Jesus draws attention to the fact that the coin bears an image—of a “man-deity,” no less—and is thus both blasphemous and idolatrous. Whoever answers Jesus’ question reveals himself to be far too familiar with un-Godly things. But the Pharisees and the Herodians “cannot refuse to answer the question for fear of being seen as ashamed of Rome in which case their role as collaborators could be compromised. So they have to answer the question, however embarrassing it might be to do so and however much it puts them in a negative light, and they do so by muttering ‘Caesar’s.’”<sup>136</sup> As Herzog points out, the “very act of holding up the coin and playing dumb borders on the sarcastic,” an observation that recalls Scott’s argument that both feigned ignorance and humour can be “effective weapons of the weak,” enabling a subordinate individual to “undermine the strong while denying any such purpose.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Herzog 2004, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Herzog 2004, 53.

<sup>136</sup> Herzog 2004, 55.

<sup>137</sup> Herzog 2004, 55.

Finally, Herzog encourages a re-examination of Jesus' final, famous statement: Before we "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," we must first determine which things are Caesar's and which are God's—or, more precisely—which things Jesus *as a Jew* understands to be Caesar's and which to be God's. For a Jew, "a coin which by its very form and appearance contravenes [God's] law ... cannot be regarded as [God's]."<sup>138</sup> What Jesus actually advises, suggests Herzog, is insubordination in the *guise* of compliance—that the Jews render the *coin* to Caesar (because it has no value) but not the *tribute* (which is due only to God and God alone). Herzog suggests that everyone in the scenario understands Jesus to be advising this (as it is in keeping with Jewish beliefs of the time), but no one can actually accuse him of advising this (for he uses the language of a compliant, tribute-paying Roman subject). With this rejection of the coin (and the tribute it symbolizes), Jesus in effect rejects the Roman occupation:

The Pharisees and Herodians have attempted to force Jesus to disclose and declare the hidden transcript of resistance to tribute as a form of resisting Roman rule. Jesus responds with an aphorism that functions like a riddle. It is his version of that third kind of speech, a disguised, ambiguous and coded way of maintaining the hidden transcript of resistance while leaving a public transcript that is in no way actionable. Jesus seems to be saying: 'return the coins to Caesar. Caesar imposed the coins on the land; pay him back in the same coinage.' But this is not a call to pay tribute as a recognition of Rome's right to rule.<sup>139</sup>

Herzog attributes the amazement of Jesus' opponents not to the content of Jesus' response but to his ability to embed a coded version of the hidden transcript of resistance in the public transcript, in a manner that is "in no way actionable"<sup>140</sup>—either by the Pharisees and the Herodians, or by the general population. Within the Jewish community, this hidden transcript of resistance to the Romans would have been known by peasants and Pharisees alike. By referring to this transcript, Jesus takes a stand: Resist those who have no right to demand tribute. By encoding the transcript, Jesus escapes arrest and enables his followers to avoid arrest as well, for any support voiced for Jesus can be defended as support for the idea of paying the

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<sup>138</sup> Herzog 2004, 56.

<sup>139</sup> Herzog 2004, 58.

<sup>140</sup> Herzog 2004, 58.

Romans their “tribute.” By using “a coded, ambiguous and elusive form of speech that communicates in the hidden transcript of resistance,” Jesus is able to express subversive ideas “while appearing to show appropriate deference to Rome and its quislings.”<sup>141</sup>

*b) Elliott*

Neil Elliott (2004) argues that, with modification, Scott’s model lends itself to a comparison of cultures across time and space. One of Scott’s “central insights,” argues Elliott, is “the observation that even in the absence of overt violence or rebellion, practices in Malaysian peasant society manifested aspects of a hidden transcript of defiance.”<sup>142</sup> If we assume that all human dialogue and practice are potentially expressions of resistance, then it is not a matter of *whether* a practice is by nature an expression of resistance (for the nature of an action depends on the meaning attributed to it by the actor) but, rather, *how* a particular practice might be used to express resistance. How an individual expresses resistance to authority (through his actions, his words, his gestures, his physical presentation) is shaped by his social environment. The task of the scholar is to assess “the discrepancy *between* the hidden transcript and the public transcript” (that is, what is openly and publicly expressed, and what is hidden) in order to measure “the impact of domination on public discourse.”<sup>143</sup> To do this, we must know what a subordinate individual can express safely and which aspects of his social environment might inform how he will disguise a message of resistance. No easy task, to be sure: “The key question, of course, is how the analyst who stands outside the social location of the hidden transcript may recognize its reiteration beyond that location .... It is only when the analyst can detect a *discrepancy* between the values expressed in speech, gesture, and practice of a subordinate group and the values that dominate in the public transcript that the analyst may speak of an emergence or upsurge of a hidden transcript.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Herzog 2004, 59-60.

<sup>142</sup> Elliott 2004, 110.

<sup>143</sup> Elliott 2004, 111, emphasis in original.

<sup>144</sup> Elliott 2004, 112, emphasis in original.

Malaysia is ideal for the study of everyday forms of resistance (hidden and overt): it has no history of organized peasant resistance or rebellion yet has a long history as an established agrarian (capitalist) economy characterised by rigid social structures: “for just this reason [, it serves] as an exception proving the rule that was the heart of Scott’s argument: that resistance, or in the strongest terms, class struggle at the ideological as well as the material level, was the fabric of a ‘hidden transcript’ in peasant society, well prior to its public expression.”<sup>145</sup> At the other end of the continuum would be a society in which open conflict and rebellion are themselves everyday forms of resistance. First-century Roman cities, suggests Elliott, can be placed at this end of the continuum, where the “urban poor” faced daily economic and social pressures, including imperial taxes, mass violence, enslavement, enforced repopulation, and military conquest. In this society veiled resistance is likely to be very different from that in agrarian Malaysia. Following Justin J. Meggitt’s (1998) reading of poverty in Roman Judaea, Elliott assumes a situation of “mass urban destitution,” which extended to Paul and the Pauline congregations. Meggitt paints a picture of a “globalizing Roman economy” in which a wide gulf separates the few very rich from the very many poor. In this society, a middle class was virtually nonexistent (our traditional view of Paul’s relative prosperity and social location is based on “anachronistic assumptions about Paul’s social mobility and independence”<sup>146</sup>). According to Meggitt, “*neither the apostle nor any members of the congregations he addresses in his epistles escaped from the harsh existence that typified life in the Roman Empire for the non-elite.*”<sup>147</sup> Instead, “*the Pauline Christians shared fully in the bleak material existence which was the lot of more than 99 percent of the inhabitants of the Empire.*”<sup>148</sup> By fostering mutually beneficial and sustaining economic partnerships among and between communities, the Pauline congregations created a socioeconomic system that undermined (and, by its existence, criticized) the Roman dominant order.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Elliott 2004, 104.

<sup>146</sup> Elliott 2004, 99.

<sup>147</sup> Elliott 2004, 99, citing Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival: Studies in the New Testament World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 75, emphasis in original.

<sup>148</sup> Elliott 2004, 99, citing Meggitt, 153, emphasis in original.

<sup>149</sup> Elliott 2004, 100.

For an action to be understood by a particular group of people as part of the discourse of resistance and yet still remain disguised or defensible as innocent, it must be mapped onto the public transcript. The more widely accepted the public-transcript backdrop, the safer and more defensible the hidden message of resistance. Elliott uses an example from contemporary Haiti to demonstrate the effectiveness of hiding a message of resistance within the framework of a widely accepted public transcript. For Elliott, modern Haiti is an appropriate bridge between Scott's agrarian Malaysia and Paul's first-century urban Judaea: "Like the Malaysian society Scott studied, Haiti's economy is largely agricultural; like Paul's Roman context, however, the people have experienced centuries of violence and exploitation."<sup>150</sup> He then presents as an example of a hidden transcript the text of a speech given by the first democratically elected president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, on 27 September 1991, immediately after he has learned of a planned military coup that will depose him within hours. Elliott suggests the speech is a clever tool intended to incite mob violence—despite the fact that it makes no mention of violence at all. On the surface, Aristide encourages Haitians to use their Constitution as an "instrument" to ward off wrong-doing. Throughout the speech, however, Aristide emphasizes repeatedly that one should not hesitate "to give [the thief] what he deserves," and "in particular, the comment that the 'instrument' in the people's hands 'has a good smell' was read by some observers as a veiled reference to 'necklacing' (assassination by placing a burning tire around a political enemy's neck)." In this way, Aristide's speech exemplifies Scott's argument that the public transcript frequently contains veiled references to the hidden transcript.<sup>151</sup>

I would add here that Aristide's speech is also a very good example of the effectiveness of the public transcript as a tool of disguise. Whether he meant to incite violence or not is debatable; what is clear is that Aristide meant for his speech to be ambiguous. By choosing to build his speech on the highly symbolic concept of "Constitution," Aristide disguises his true intention, or at the very least implies that *if* it had been his intention to present a disguised discourse, we would not necessarily

<sup>150</sup> Elliott 2004, 105.

<sup>151</sup> Elliott 2004, 112, citing Alex Dupuy as translator, *Haiti in the New World Order: The Limits of the Democratic Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 128-29.

know it. “Constitution” invokes other highly abstract, powerful concepts: “freedom,” “democracy,” “justice” and “equality,” to name a few. But these abstracts are not concretely expressed the same way in all societies. Thus, while “Constitution” may represent freedom and justice to any number of societies for whom “Constitution” is a powerful concept, the type of practices considered to be free and just may differ widely from one society to the next. Aristide’s speech can conceivably be understood to advocate any form of “justice” or “freedom” that the listener subscribes to, all of which are then potentially defensible under the protective umbrella of “Constitution.” Thus, while Aristide’s “instrument” might be “Constitution,” his Constitution may not look like ours. The cleverness of the disguise lies precisely in the wide accessibility and defensibility of the backdrop (the Constitution), which at the same time is so highly symbolic that almost any meaning can be layered onto it. To this end, the public-transcript element of Constitution potentially disguises precisely those unconstitutional practices Aristide is accused of inciting.

In Roman Judea, biblical interpretation and apocalyptic discourse acted much as Aristide’s Constitution in that they could be used to disguise resistance to imperial domination. Following E.R. Goodenough (1962), Elliott looks at Book 2 of Philo’s *On Dreams*, where Philo uses the widely accepted practice of allegorical biblical interpretation to present a political view that one is hard pressed *not* to read as a sharp criticism of imperial arrogance. Philo’s theme is supposedly “caution,” and he uses Joseph’s dream of bowing sheaves of grain as a jumping-off point to discuss those who “set themselves up above.” But his “chosen medium, allegorical biblical interpretation, allows him a certain ‘deniability,’ a ‘disguise’ for his political views ... And what of those views? Philo describes an unnatural imposition of dictatorship upon those who are naturally free. This theme, which has no basis in the text of Genesis, provides us a glimpse into a hidden transcript in which Philo participates.”<sup>152</sup> The cleverness of the disguise lies in the highly visible public-transcript activity—allegorical biblical interpretation—that is the backdrop for

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<sup>152</sup> Elliott 2004, 114.

Philo's hidden message, which attributes to the symbol of Joseph's dream a new, contemporary meaning.

Elliott notes a similar vein of resistance to imperialism in Paul's letters. Despite his infrequent use of traditional apocalyptic terminology and many of the standard apocalyptic symbols,<sup>153</sup> "it is nevertheless evident that Paul is familiar with ... aspects of apocalyptic thought, and expected his readers to recognize his references to them. That is, they constitute elements of a larger worldview, a transcript that is not fully evident in the text of the letters."<sup>154</sup> This is the framework we must use when interpreting the meaning of Paul's letters. Within this framework, Paul is a political voice for an oppressed and destitute population, "the very intentionality of apocalyptic or 'revelatory' rhetoric ... [referring] to a reality that is not universally, or 'publicly,' evident."<sup>155</sup> To this end, any use of apocalyptic language or reference to apocalyptic events, whether hidden or overt, clear or cryptic, becomes a veiled allusion to a future free from Rome. The apocalyptic tradition becomes the public-transcript "backdrop" on which to inscribe new political meaning.

### *c) Kittredge*

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge (2004) points out that Scott's theory is grounded in his study of social groups for which he has a bounty of evidence. His sources for hidden transcripts of resistance include "oral histories, diaries, historical accounts, anthropological material ... [and] literary depictions."<sup>156</sup> Biblical scholars, on the other hand, have little such evidence to interpret. Aside from limited archaeological

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<sup>153</sup> For example, "apocalyptic timetables, descriptions of the architecture of heaven, or accounts of demons and angels ... rewards of the blessed or delight in the torture of the wicked." See Beker 1980, 145.

<sup>154</sup> Elliott 2004, 118. Elliott's use of "transcript" here is reminiscent of Brian Stock's (1983) model of the "textual community." A textual community is one in which a particular text plays a society- and culture-shaping role in daily life, to the extent that even those unable to read or without easy access to the text itself are profoundly influenced by the contents of the text.

Richard Horsley (2000, 96-98) also notes the important symbolic role of the apocalyptic tradition for first-century Judean political discourse: "The scribal circles that produced this literature were able, through their revelations, creatively to envision a future for their society in freedom and justice beyond their present oppression under imperial rulers and/or their local client rulers... The fundamental message of most of this Judean apocalyptic literature ... focused on future deliverance from imperial domination."

<sup>155</sup> Elliott 2004, 118.

<sup>156</sup> Kittredge 2004, 146.

findings, many of which may be only indirectly related to the subject of study, biblical scholars must rely for their evidence on a canon of texts that cannot be read purely as history. Before the sources can be analyzed for evidence of a hidden transcript, they must be set against the backdrop of the historical situation. Yet because the sources themselves cannot be interpreted purely as history, the historian must first reconstruct the historical situation from whatever meagre evidence she has to hand.<sup>157</sup> Only from within this reconstruction can we look for evidence of a hidden transcript of resistance. In her analysis of Ephesians, however, Kittredge observes that “how one reconstructs the situation behind the letter—how one defines the conflict and the positions involved—has an enormous impact on how the letter is read. How one defines the domination and the resistance is dependent upon this intermediate step of reconstruction.”<sup>158</sup> This reality highlights what Kittredge calls the “politics of interpretation”: “[The] process of reconstructing history on the basis of texts and then reading the texts in light of that reconstructed history is stubbornly circular. Acknowledging the circularity focuses attention on the hermeneutical and political choices made by the interpreter in the process of reconstruction.”<sup>159</sup>

Kittredge argues that how one “reads” domination and resistance and the nature of a subtext that might exist in Ephesians depends on the underlying model of Christian history being used to situate the letter itself. How much power and autonomy did early Christian communities have in the Roman Empire at the time? How did the pagan environment shape early Christian thought? How were the early Christians affected by other contemporary religious and social groups? How did these groups express themselves textually, linguistically and symbolically? The answers that we accept for these questions, based on our reading of the historical situation, will determine the nature of the resistance we find. While we must recreate the social and political context in order to interpret the text, our re-creation of the social and political context will also determine how we interpret the text.

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<sup>157</sup> Cf. Rubenstein (2003), whose ethnography of the Babylonian Talmud depends on his reconstruction of the historical situation of the rabbinic academy.

<sup>158</sup> Kittredge 2004, 148.

<sup>159</sup> Kittredge 2004, 146.

To avoid the potential circularity of this sort of textual investigation, argues Kittredge, we must evaluate the historical “adequacy” of our reconstruction according to how well it speaks to the “evidence.” To do this, we must first “clarify and make explicit the sociological, historical and theological models used in [its] creation.”<sup>160</sup> Only then can we assess how the models we are using to explain a historical situation might actually help to *create* the historical situation—at least as far as our interpretation is concerned.

*d) Boyarin*

Traditionally, the first few centuries of the millennium are characterized by historians as profoundly shaped by the split in Judaism between Jews and the Jewish followers of Christ, who would later be known as the first Christians: “There has been a kind of general collusion between Jewish and Christian scholars (as earlier between the Rabbis and the Doctors of the Church) to insist on [a] total lack of contact and interaction [between Jews and Christians of the period].”<sup>161</sup> The reasons for this alleged lack of contact (both historically and today) are voiced differently by each group, “in the case of Christianity a desire to prove that Christianity transcended or transformed Judaism, in the case of Jews a desire to suggest that Christianity was an alien form of Judaism which deviated from the true path.”<sup>162</sup>

Boyarin (1995 and 1999) argues that the rabbinic texts must be viewed not solely as historical documents, nor as purely religious discourse, but as reflections of an ongoing dialogue in response to contemporary social and political tensions. Boyarin argues that the relationship between the Jews and the early Christians was far more complex and intertwined than either group cared to admit. In many ways, it was the desire to distance themselves from each other (rather than any identifiable series of events) that shaped the discourse of Jews and Christians. Evidence in the rabbinic and patristic texts suggests that the directions taken by rabbinic Judaism and the

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<sup>160</sup> Kittredge 2004, 151.

<sup>161</sup> Boyarin 1999, 7.

<sup>162</sup> Boyarin 1999, 7, citing Philip S. Alexander, “‘The Parting of the Ways’ from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in James D.G. Dunn, editor, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, 1-25, at 3. The Second Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism, Durham, September 1989 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991).

early Christian church owe much to the contentious relationship between the two nascent ideologies: The doctrines established by the rabbis and the Christian Fathers were often defined in opposition to, or as distinct from, each other. The texts also witness how each group struggled to define its evolving relationship with its imperial overseers, in an environment that, though sometimes tolerant of religious individualism, was nevertheless a dangerous place to express one's devotion to powers other than those expressly approved by the Romans. Within this context, resistance to authority frequently meant imprisonment or death. One could resist openly (risking death or other disagreeable consequences) or covertly (while seeming to acquiesce), or not resist at all.

Boyarin accedes that the primary challenge faced by cultural historians of the rabbinic period is that "the culture of the Talmud is a formation for which we have virtually no evidence 'outside the texts.'" At best, attempts to tease out information about "ideological conflict" or "power relations" from the rabbinic texts results in "reproducing the ideology of the dominant voices." But this need not be the case, argues Boyarin. Instead, we should view the rabbinic texts as "attempts to propose utopian solutions to cultural tensions." When we observe "the effects of the energy expended by the culture in attempting to suppress or (put more positively) deal with the tensions, the underlying strains and tensions can be brought to light."<sup>163</sup>

Like astronomers who discover heavenly bodies too small for their eyes to see by observing the distorting effects of such bodies on other entities, the equivocations in the texts will be taken as evidence for tensions in the society. As a stand-in for the documentary richness that historicists of more fortunate climes have at their disposal, I will substitute a method of arguing that texts from the talmudic literature (including midrash) of very different genres share the same cultural problematics as their underlying (sometimes implicit) themes.<sup>164</sup>

Boyarin argues that the structure and dialectic style of the rabbinic texts serves to preserve a hidden transcript of the rabbis, and that until we read the texts "against the grain" with an eye for subsurface meaning we will not fully understand what the rabbis intended to transmit—or, indeed, how an ongoing discourse of resistance to

<sup>163</sup> Boyarin 1995, 14-15. On the same topic, see also Boyarin 1997, 1998 and 2005.

<sup>164</sup> Boyarin 1995, 15.

domination may have been expressed in non-violent, clandestine ways. Boyarin demonstrates that the meaning of a talmudic passage in isolation is very different from its meaning as part of a larger whole. In isolation, the meaning of a single passage is limited; a deeper, more complex meaning is hidden *until the reader considers it in conjunction with other talmudic passages*. Boyarin reasons:

Any view or interpretation that is undercut by another in the same canonical work unsettles, almost by definition, its own use as a foundation for cultural and social practice. Accordingly, in the research on this culture it is vital always to pay very close attention to the structure built into the very texts, to the interplay of view and counter-view. I think that it is this last point that is most often ignored when history is written by non-talmudists using talmudic texts. Thus, a view will often enough be quoted as typical of rabbinic Judaism when in fact it has been cited in the talmudic text only to be discredited or at any rate undermined by a counter-text.<sup>165</sup>

When the rabbinic texts are read this way, it becomes clear that a range of diverse doctrines and opinions seethe beneath the textual surface, their “cacophonous and carnivalesque” discourse<sup>166</sup> preserved for those who seek to understand the literary and social context of the dialogue. Boyarin’s argument about the relationship of the textual environment of a passage to the text’s deeper meaning reflects his approach to the study of rabbinic history generally: environmental context is the key. If we do not study the context of a textual passage—both its literary context and its social context—we will not understand its meaning to its creators or its audience.<sup>167</sup>

While Scott suggests that we rarely have access to the hidden transcripts of subordinate groups, and that we must ascertain these transcripts by “suspicious” readings of public-transcript evidence, Boyarin argues that in the talmudic discourse we have “direct access” to the hidden transcript of the rabbis: “This literature, composed in a language that the conquerors did not know, provided a safe and private space within which to elaborate the transcript hidden away from the colonizer.”<sup>168</sup> The Talmud delights in its tricksters and their double entendres, giving

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<sup>165</sup> Boyarin 1995, 28.

<sup>166</sup> See Boyarin 1999, 65.

<sup>167</sup> This is not to say that a text cannot also have a “true” meaning aside from the meaning intended or understood by its authors and their contemporary audience but, simply, that when we make statements about the nature of resistance to imperial or other pressures in Roman Judaea, we must consider the relationship of the text to its (social and cultural) context.

<sup>168</sup> Boyarin 1999, 46.

the reader a unique insight into both the meaning the rabbis intended to impart to their Jewish audience, and the meaning reserved for non-Jews and Roman conquerors. As Boyarin puts it, “[t]his ‘hidden transcript,’ preserved before our eyes in the Talmud, provides an elegant demonstration of Scott’s argument that ‘what may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends.’”<sup>169</sup>

Thus, in the Talmud and other rabbinic documents, we have exactly what Scott laments is so rarely found in any study of subordinate cultures: direct access to an off-stage dialogue not preserved in the public transcript—that is, the publicly accepted documentation of relationships and events—which is frequently shaped by the authoritative powers in a particular society. The rabbinic documents were transmitted by and for members of a subordinate group, in venues similar to Scott’s “autonomous social sites”<sup>170</sup>:

The study of Torah in general in sites such as the Bet Hamidrash, or even more in public “crowds,” would provide precisely such an arena, and it does not matter, according to Scott, what the discourse is in that arena. Insofar as it maintains the possibility of a hidden transcript, of a place within which the dominated Jews could elaborate their true views of their Roman (and Sassanian) overlords, it would serve the function. This is even more the case, of course, when the content expressed in the study of Torah itself incorporated encoded or open contempt for the rulers, as was frequently enough the case with the study of Torah. The response of the “Romans,” their efforts to prohibit the study of Torah, and in particular to prohibit it in crowds, would

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<sup>169</sup> Boyarin 1999, 48, citing Scott 1990, 34.

<sup>170</sup> Just how much power was wielded by the early rabbis after the fall of the Second Temple—both as subjects of Imperial Rome and as leaders of the now Temple-less Jewish Diaspora—is a subject of debate. It is also unclear if those who preserved and transmitted the rabbinic documents derived their authority by virtue of their role as preservers of Jewish knowledge, or if the role of preservation was taken on by those who already held authority within the Jewish population. Nor is it clear how much authority was ascribed to the texts (and the discourse they preserve) after they were initially recorded. We should not presume that the texts reflect only the experiences and thoughts of third-century rabbis when we know they were edited and interpreted (and in many cases elaborated) by sixth-century rabbis, who faced political, geographical and social circumstances that differed from those of their third-century forefathers, and who sought to derive relevant meaning from the rabbinic documents and to transmit this meaning to their successors. We also should not speak of “Roman Judaea” as a homogenous entity. The experiences of Jews in one area, of one time period, and of a particular social status within the Empire differed from the experiences of Jews of other locations, time periods and status. But while the nature and extent of rabbinic power in Roman Judaea is ambiguous, it is appropriate to view the rabbinic documents as indicative of a hidden transcript because they were written and transmitted by a subordinate group, frequently at some risk to members’ safety.

indicate their understanding—or at any rate, the narrator’s understanding—of the role of such gatherings in the maintenance of the “hidden transcript.”<sup>171</sup>

Beneath the textual surface of the dialogue is a political message that cannot be understood unless the audience is familiar with the code employed by the author. Modern talmudic scholars have some of the keys to this code, for many of the principles of modern talmudic interpretation are derived from ancient forms (including word play and double meanings, as well as biblical allegory). But we also have access to this hidden transcript, suggests Boyarin, precisely because one of the primary functions of the Talmud is to preserve dissent. He contrasts the approach of the rabbis to that of the early Christian Fathers:

As ‘orthodox’ Christianity developed its definitive corpus of patristic literature, dissenting voices gradually were either eliminated or homogenized into the ‘single-authored’ text of the Church ... while in the rabbinic texts, the chorus of heterogeneity ... remained loud and cacophonous .... In rabbinic Jewish textuality, the very fact that both options remain enshrined in the same text with the same consequent authority produces a religio-cultural situation in which schism can be avoided while nearly opposing ideological options both remain active.<sup>172</sup>

That we can discern elements of a hidden transcript in the rabbinic texts suggests that the documents may serve not only to cloak rabbinic and/or Jewish resistance to Roman (or later) oppression but also to disguise ideas from anyone able to access the meaning of the surface text (through an understanding of language or script) yet less well versed in the dialectic tactics developed by the rabbis themselves. If this is the case, then the Talmud’s preservation of dissent becomes a *mode of disguise*, enabling the rabbis to preserve transcripts of resistance to imperial pressure, but also to other forms of authority, perhaps closer to home.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Boyarin 1999, 58.

<sup>172</sup> Boyarin 1999, 65. Boyarin is quick to point out that preserving dissent does not necessarily indicate greater tolerance for difference: “there is no reason to see the Rabbis as any more tolerant than the Fathers. The issue is rather the elasticity or plasticity of the discourse of the different traditions in their ability and desire to allow heterogeneity on certain kinds of questions” (66).

<sup>173</sup> It is important to avoid the trap of assuming that if a rabbinic text preserves a wide range of dissent, then it must be representative of the range of opinion expressed at the time. The Talmud is not a random collection of all possible arguments; it is a heavily (re)edited, (re)interpreted and (re)annotated anthology of thoughtful commentary. We would be foolish to presume that the “dissent” preserved within the pages of the Talmud is there *only for the purpose of preserving dissent*

In *Dying for God* (1999), Boyarin demonstrates that the Babylonian Talmud and the early patristic texts both serve as backdrops for the extended arbitration of remarkably similar social conflicts, in this case “negotiated” through the discourse of martyrdom—that is, not the act of martyrdom itself, but rather the narratives told and retold *about* the act.<sup>174</sup> Taking the role of martyrdom as his primary point of articulation, Boyarin traces the relationship between early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. During the first few centuries of the new millennium, not only did the “lines of influence and dialogue” between Christianity and Judaism “go in both directions,”<sup>175</sup> but even to discuss “Christianity” and “Judaism” as easily separable, well-defined belief systems introduces anachronism into our historical model. In truth, argues Boyarin, within the vibrant, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Hellenistic Mediterranean, there were many “Judaisms.” The “Pauline religion” (that is, the religion of Paul and other supporters of Jesus of Nazareth) was simply one of these many Hellenistic Judaisms, and “a separation between Jewish and Christian religio-cultural formations should properly be attributed only to a later period.”<sup>176</sup> Yet even a model of bidirectional dialogue does not fully explain the similarities between the teachings of Paul and the philosophy of, for example, Philo, which “cannot easily be accounted for by assuming influence, since both were active at the same time in quite widely separated places.”<sup>177</sup> The similarities between Paul and Philo are due at least in part to the fact that they both believed more or less the same things: that is, they were both Jews. Only later did a dialogue of *difference* (as opposed to a discourse of sameness, with a few points of contention), take on such importance to the rabbis and the Fathers.

One of the areas in which this later dialogue takes place is the discourse of martyrdom, which receives different treatment in the patristic and rabbinic documents. This is due in part to differences in the structure and style of the texts

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(or, indeed, that it is *actual* dissent rather than a manufactured artifice of dissent). Instead, we must ask ourselves: Which voices, which dissenting arguments might have been edited out? Why might these particular voices and arguments have been preserved? How might their relationship to the surrounding dialogue contribute to the whole?

<sup>174</sup> See also Boyarin 1997.

<sup>175</sup> Boyarin 1999, 19.

<sup>176</sup> Boyarin 1995, 3-4.

<sup>177</sup> Boyarin 1995, 4.

themselves, but it is clear that the meaning of martyrdom (both as an act and as a topic of discussion) for the rabbis differs from the meaning it held for the early Christian Fathers in several key ways.<sup>178</sup> The physical act of martyrdom can be seen as a response to imperial power and authority. Boyarin argues that the *discourse* surrounding the practice of martyrdom is also a response to political and social tensions.<sup>179</sup> The act of martyrdom is the “public transcript,” or the “onstage” dialogue; the discourse surrounding an act of martyrdom potentially serves to convey “hidden transcripts” of resistance. For example, the Talmud does not deny that Rabbi Akiva was executed for disobeying the Romans, but the discourse surrounding his death serves as the background for a wide-ranging debate about the meaning of authority and obedience—without ever denying the rabbi’s infraction of Roman law.

Boyarin’s exploration suggests that Scott’s model, while it has good bones, is ultimately too simplistic to account for the variation and complexity with which human beings communicate subversive ideas within more publicly accessible and acceptable scripts.<sup>180</sup> Resistance to imperial authority may not be the only kind of

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<sup>178</sup> Much of the discourse on martyrdom that appears in the Talmud was recorded long after the death of the martyrs themselves. Boyarin argues that the talmudic discourse may suggest not the political and social situations faced by the martyrs but, rather, the political and social situations faced later by the rabbis. In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, the discourse surrounding the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva may be indicative of the debate about the meaning of martyrdom three or four centuries *after the death of Akiva*, not the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom to himself or his immediate disciples. Cf. Martin Jaffee (2001), who argues that the rabbinic texts likely reflect the thoughts of rabbis who lived in social and cultural circumstances far removed from those experienced by the “main characters” of the Talmud. This argument goes against a traditional Jewish understanding of the Talmud as the recorded utterance of a body of orally transmitted wisdom extending back as far as the covenant between God and the Jews at Mt. Sinai.

<sup>179</sup> Boyarin follows the lead of Glen Bowersock, who argues in his *Martyrdom and Rome* (1995) that “martyrdom” as an event is a religious creation of Late Antiquity. Bowersock does not minimize the sacrifice of earlier historical figures of political resistance (e.g., Socrates at Athens, or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnaces of Nebuchadnezzar) but concludes that “martyrdom” as a religious or spiritual event includes the element of expectation of reward—in a realm beyond this one—for political or social resistance: “never before [Late Antiquity] had such courage been absorbed into a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward ... Martyrdom, as we understand it, was conceived and devised in response to complex social, religious, and political pressures” (Boyarin 1998, 591, quoting Bowersock 1995, 5).

<sup>180</sup> To be fair, Scott (1990) qualifies his discussion of public and hidden transcripts at the outset, indicating that there are many public transcripts and many hidden transcripts, and that one individual may participate in any number of these. Having made this observation, however, he goes no further, and the remainder of the book focuses primarily on the interaction between “the” public transcript and “the” hidden transcript. Yet the possibility that there are many public and hidden transcripts and that, as Boyarin implies, there may be hidden transcripts within hidden transcripts profoundly

resistance the rabbis wished to encode within the talmudic texts. As the Talmud contains within itself conflicting interpretations of various events, all canonized within a single text, one could argue that the Talmud served as a means for rabbis to transmit any ideas not necessarily widely accepted within the rabbinic community itself; these would be protected and preserved by virtue of the architectural and stylistic framework of the Talmud. Thus, a document that serves the rabbis collectively as a means to disguise or conceal from the dominant a dialogue about how to negotiate one's relationship with an oppressor may *also* serve the rabbis individually to conceal or disguise other "resistances." Rabbis may have wished to conceal resistance to a growing Christianity, for example, or resistance to other rabbinic ideas. And as the rabbinic documents were primarily reserved for an elite group of scholarly Jews, they also served as a means to conceal *from other Jews* any ideas the rabbis wished to keep hidden from the rest of the Jewish population.

If we understand transcripts of hidden resistance only as they relate to resistance to domination, then we overly constrain our exploration. Human beings do not simply resist the political oppressor: they may resist perceived threats from all sides in various social, political and cultural contexts. How a group responds to one threat will influence how it responds to another. If we wish to understand how a group might resist domination, and how that resistance may be concealed within a public transcript or publicly accessible text, we must also consider how the group resists other historical and contemporaneous threats.

### **Hiding resistance in text**

Scott's (1985, 1990) interest in resistance lies primarily in the "weapons of the weak." He considers what forms these weapons might take and how they might disguise discontent that would otherwise be unobservable as part of the unrecorded hidden transcript of the subordinate:

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complicates how information may be disguised or concealed within a particular transcript or textual document—and from whom it might be concealed—which in turn influences how we might look for and interpret this information.

If the decoding of power relations depended on full access to the more or less clandestine discourse of subordinate groups, students of power—both historical and contemporary—would face an impasse. We are saved from throwing up our hands in frustration by the fact that the hidden transcript is typically expressed openly—albeit in a disguised form. I suggest, along these lines, how we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.<sup>181</sup>

The cultural environment of the subordinate group is the fodder both for the character of the hidden transcript of resistance and for the nature of the disguise. Key to Scott's model is the presumption that *any human action* can serve as a vehicle for the clandestine or veiled expression of resistance, as long as one's fellow subordinates are aware of the existence of a message and the manner of its disguise, and one's oppressors are not.<sup>182</sup>

Scott does not expressly consider the act of writing or the role of text in his assessment. He does not refer to writing as a potential weapon of the weak (or, for that matter, of the strong), and he does not consider what role the creation, preservation or transmission of a text might play in a subordinate group's expression of insubordinate ideas. He implies only in passing that "rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre" may be written down.<sup>183</sup> Yet a long and complex association with the written word has enabled human beings to manipulate profoundly their social and political environment—changing opinions, creating and destroying alliances, waging wars, signing peace treaties. The written word has played a starring role in acts of domination and acts of resistance, often in unexpected ways. Exploring how writing might be used to disguise a transcript of

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<sup>181</sup> Scott 1990, xii-xiii.

<sup>182</sup> Alternatively, as in the case of Herzog's reading of Jesus above, the disguise is one that the oppressors are not able to expose without also endangering the integrity of their position.

<sup>183</sup> According to Scott's model, folkloric cultural elements present the ideal opportunity to enshroud transcripts of resistance from the gaze of the oppressor, providing for the transmission of subversive ideas in a wider, more public forum while lessening any chance of negative repercussions for both sender and receiver. Euphemism, symbolism, allegory, anonymity and gesture all provide mechanisms to voice resistance in ways that are not "actionable." If the dominant group reacts to insubordination that is only ever hinted at in public but never openly avowed by the subordinate group, then it reveals its weakness, its fear, and—practically speaking—its uncertainty about the legitimacy and competency of its rule.

resistance should deepen our understanding of the discourse of power.<sup>184</sup> In the same way that a historian of dance might examine how hidden transcripts of resistance or opposition might be expressed in the guise of dance, or a historian of architecture might explore how a society's architectural structures embody or express resistance or opposition to social or ideological domination, so might a historian of literacy investigate how written text might serve to record transcripts of resistance.

A functionalist approach to the study of writing might suggest that writing is a tool used to record human utterance and experience, not necessarily a disguise in and of itself but, rather, a means to record resistance (in all its guises) for a wider audience. One could argue that the Torah documents Israel's resistance to potentially destructive outside forces. The resistance of the Maccabees to Hellenistic rule forms a key narrative in the apocryphal literature. The synoptic Gospels record the passive resistance of Jesus to Roman imperial rule. Luther recorded his discontent in writing, and many of the ideas of the Protestant Reformation arguably owe their rapid spread in part to the printing press and a growing literate public. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was described by one American journalist as a revolution of paper, in which the Bolshevik headquarters churned out printed documents twenty-four hours a day.<sup>185</sup> Today, many graffiti can be seen as expressions of resistance to authority—both in their presentation (frequently on public buildings or structures) and in their text. As in many of the examples noted here, at least some of the power of the resistant message is precisely in the writing of it—without a written record, the power of the message may be lost or altered, or degrade over time.<sup>186</sup> Even the act of writing itself—preserving a record of resistance—can be seen as an act of insubordination. The actions of the Maccabees, Jesus, Rabbi Akiva, Luther and

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<sup>184</sup> Despite his attempts to clarify the meaning of “transcript” within the parameters of the model, Scott's use of the term can be misleading, especially for the scholar who studies the social function of literacy and text. *Public transcript*, for example, is “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate”; *hidden transcript* indicates those human interactions that take place “offstage,” out of sight of the other groups. As defined by Scott, “transcript” includes to varying degrees a range of values, ideologies, perspectives and communicative forms—most of which are not related to written “script” at all.

<sup>185</sup> See Reed 1922.

<sup>186</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that written records are not also susceptible to change or degradation over time, yet the nature of this change or degradation is different from that which occurs when a message of resistance is not preserved in writing.

others reverberate today in part because they were recorded, preserved and transmitted in writing. The texts we have may not record events as they occurred, but their power as symbols of resistance is separate from their historical accuracy.

This study argues that writing and text provide opportunities for preserving a record of resistance, not simply as a means to document folkloric disguise but, rather, as a means of disguise in their own right. The study seeks to reveal *covert* resistance, which may be cloaked by the structure, syntax, diction or other features of a document, but which is possible to discern upon a suspicious reading of the text. While writing may be used to record hidden transcripts of resistance disguised in various folkloric forms, it can also be manipulated over time and with intention to conceal additional expressions of resistance that may not be adequately expressed in other ways. Text offers disguising qualities that differ from those offered by rumour, folktale or euphemism alone.

The capacity of text to conceal is in part due to what has been referred to as its “fixity”—that is, once a text is recorded in written form, it is fixed in a way that oral traditions are not.<sup>187</sup> Altering a written text is a messy endeavour: the editor erases, rewrites and appends, and always risks introducing errors into the original text. Each performance of an oral narrative, on the other hand, stands on its own, at the same time recalling the extended narrative tradition that gave birth to it. But while the so-called fixity of a text limits our ability to alter it physically with the same ease with which we might alter an orally delivered narrative, the same fixity encourages increasingly complex textual interpretations. It may not be easily possible to alter a particular written word in order to express one’s meaning, but one can layer the written word with additional (hidden) meaning. Theoretically, one could imbue a single, textual word with any number of abstract, non-textually represented meanings.<sup>188</sup> This interpretive approach means that, while the literal representation

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<sup>187</sup> The idea that writing has negative effects on human communication due to its fixity can be traced through history. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Plato expresses concern that writing has a negative impact on memory and intelligence (275a). In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul states “the letter killeth, but the spirit [that is, breath, whence comes spoken word] giveth life.” Modern scholars have expressed similar sentiments: Consider Foucault’s (1977) argument in “What is an Author?” and in his earlier *Order of Things* (1970) that writing “kills” the author.

<sup>188</sup> I do not mean to suggest that this kind of multi-layer, abstract symbolic meaning is not possible in an oral-traditional context. Rather, the fixed nature of a completed and (in the case of the biblical

on the page may remain more or less the same as the text is preserved and transmitted across generations, the text's meaning is potentially extraordinarily fluid—and wholly dependent on the social and political environment of the readers for whom the text has meaning. This ensures that any member of the audience who knows *only the literal text* is likely not aware of additional layers of meaning that may be understood by individuals who are more intimately familiar with the social environment in which the text is created and interpreted.

At the same time, the physical structure of the text enables the expression of meaning through the juxtaposition of one passage with another—*regardless of whether or not the second passage is part of the immediate experience of the audience at the time*. As in the case of Talmud study, the meaning of a single textual passage may be deepened or refined when it is read or heard alongside another textual passage, or its meaning may be augmented by virtue of the audience's prior knowledge of another textual narrative, despite the fact that this text may not be part of the present reading.

In his *Implications of Literacy* (1983), Brian Stock argues that medieval European Christian communities were textual communities, whose environment was mediated by their engagement with a single text: the Christian Bible. As European medieval life was centred on a particular interpretation of the biblical texts, one need not have been literate to have led a life profoundly influenced by the Bible. “With shared assumptions,” suggests Stock, “the members [of a textual community] were free to discuss, to debate, or to disagree on other matters, to engage in personal interpretations of the Bible or to some degree in individualized meditation and worship.”<sup>189</sup> We can extend Stock's argument to suggest that, if the members of any subordinate group share a common underlying interpretive framework—or, in Stock's words, a set of shared assumptions—then any textual document produced within this group is likely to reflect this interpretive framework and should be read

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literature, for example) canonized text *demand*s a fluid interpretive approach by the user in order to ensure that the texts remain relevant as the world in which they were created inevitably changes.

<sup>189</sup> Stock 1983, 91.

as an extension of it.<sup>190</sup> Likewise, any document produced within this group potentially incorporates or reflects the meanings of other documents or narratives or other cultural creations within this interpretive framework. Particularly in the cases of texts created in environments where the open expression of certain ideas is likely to invite harsh response, we must assume that a document's meaning is only partially to be found in the text itself. A more profound meaning may be discernible only when we interpret the text alongside other forms of cultural expression. One of the primary challenges of this investigation is to determine how to access the common underlying interpretive framework of a given subordinate group.

*The three principles of disguise*

This study considers how written texts may be used to conceal everyday expressions of resistance in oral-traditional and early literate cultures, or in cultures that demonstrate a high degree of orality. When we examine the oral-traditional "language" of the text's production environment, we find layers of meaning not immediately discernible upon an isolated or "face-value" reading. Arguably, additional, subversive meaning may be understood by those members of the audience familiar with the oral-cultural referents the text employs, but not by audience members who are unfamiliar with the composition's oral-traditional context. From this, we can suggest that, in the past, the use of such oral-traditional referents within the body of a written text may have conveyed information to some members of the audience selectively.

I propose that the disguises employed by a text to conceal subversive ideas will reflect the text's oral-cultural environment. Because the ability to see through the disguise depends upon the audience's fluency in a particular referential "language,"<sup>191</sup> the oral-traditional context in which the text is composed or recorded is of elemental importance to our understanding any subversive transcripts hidden within the text itself. Furthermore, I argue that different oral-traditional cultures will

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<sup>190</sup> See also Foley 1999, in which he discusses a similar model for interpreting Homer's *Odyssey*. Foley's work is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>191</sup> See Foley 1999.

use similar processes of disguise. To test these proposals, I examine three texts from three significantly different (yet all highly oral) cultural environments: Avodah Zarah, a tractate of the Babylonian Talmud (c. 500-600 CE); Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 750 BCE); and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Using Scott's model of hidden transcripts as an analytical framework, I read the three texts "against the grain" for hidden expressions of resistance.

In addition to Scott's hidden transcripts, the study employs other analytical models: first, a functionalist model of writing and literacy, focusing on the ways that writing is used by different groups of people rather than on the skills employed in the creation and decoding of text or on the denotative meaning of written symbols;<sup>192</sup> second, a New Historicist framework, which encourages a textual reading that takes into account the unique circumstances of the author, the audience and the text's contemporary cultural environment;<sup>193</sup> and third, an anthropological approach, by which I create an ethnography for each text, based on a study of the text's authorial (and in some cases editorial) setting.<sup>194</sup> This ethnography highlights relationships between textual features and oral-traditional referents, providing a framework for the comparison of very different texts. Finally, new directions in postcolonial theory and subaltern studies<sup>195</sup>—in particular scholars' understanding of the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate as a co-dependent one—underscore the need to reframe questions about authority within a given population. To what extent does social power rest with the dominant hegemony, and to what extent are the subjugated downtrodden and marginalized?

Chapter 1 considers Boyarin's (1999) analysis of tractate Avodah Zarah as a narrative of social resistance. First, I develop—as far as possible given the parameters of this study and the scholarship available—an ethnography of the

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<sup>192</sup> See the discussion above. The functionalist model of writing and literacy was first articulated by Street (1984) and, later, Finnegan (1988). It found support with the work of scholars such as Thomas (1992, 1989), Steiner (1994), Collins (1995), and Collins and Blot (2003). The model was a response to the deterministic "Great Divide" model, which suggested a strong evolutionary dividing line between literate and non-literate cultures, an idea supported initially by Goody (1977, 1987), Goody and Watt (1968), Havelock (1982, 1986) and Ong (1982).

<sup>193</sup> See, e.g., Greenblatt (1980) and Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000).

<sup>194</sup> See Rubenstein (2003), Boyarin (1992) and Geertz (1973).

<sup>195</sup> See Battacharya (1983), Guha and Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1994) and Prakash (1994).

Babylonian Talmud. I then use Daniel Boyarin's suspicious reading of *Avodah Zarah*, in which he examines the tractate for evidence of hidden transcripts in rabbinic martyrdom narratives, to demonstrate how the text is used to disguise, obfuscate and direct perspectives on the role of martyrdom in rabbinic Judaism. Using James Scott's model of hidden transcripts of resistance as a framework, I then suggest that we can observe at work in the tractate *three principles of disguise* by which an oral-traditional culture may conceal politically subversive messages in written text: 1) *articulation*, or the veiling of resistance with diction and syntax, 2) *construction*, or the cloaking of subversive meaning in textual structure, and 3) *diversion*, or the obfuscation of subversion by focusing audience attention elsewhere—much like the magician's sleight of hand. I then propose that these three principles of disguise can be observed (to varying degrees) in texts produced by other societies that display a high degree of "oral residue."<sup>196</sup>

Chapter 2 applies the three-principle model to Homer's *Odyssey* and considers how Homer uses text and *sêmata* to disguise Penelope's resistance to social patriarchy through the everyday activity of weaving. Chapter 3 examines how Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* uses text to disguise Thady Quirk's subversive tactics beneath the man's everyday service to the Rackrent family. First I develop a textual ethnography for Homer's *Odyssey* (a Greek oral epic recorded in the eighth century BCE) and Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (an Irish novel published in 1800). I then conduct a suspicious reading of each text, looking for evidence of the three principles of disguise. Though the function of writing and text in each of the three cultural environments differs—that is, the *ethnographies* of the texts differ—the *principles* used to conceal political meaning are similar, encoding resistance by using elements of the text's (oral-traditional) environment in predictable ways. Ultimately, I find evidence of the three principles of disguise in both the *Odyssey* and *Castle Rackrent*, which suggests to me that even in oral-traditional or highly oral environments, text is employed as an "everyday form of resistance" or as a "weapon of the weak," serving to disguise political or social resistance even within those

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<sup>196</sup> Walter J. Ong (1982, 1965) uses this phrase and the phrase "residual orality" to indicate oral-traditional characteristics still observable in cultures that are not primary oral cultures.

groups that rely heavily on oral traditions and the spoken word. I find that though the texts are produced in very different environments, they conceal subversion in similar ways. The three principles of disguise enable a comparison of these three diverse cultures by highlighting similarities in their textual communicative patterns. The study concludes with suggestions for further research and additional applications of the model using other cultural texts.

Chapter 1  
**Transcripts of Resistance in Talmud**

The primary methodological problem which has haunted the modern study of ancient Judaism is that providing a history of a text and an account of its sources does not itself provide a social history. Only with the greatest difficulty, if at all, do these sources so analyzed offer data for the reconstruction of social contexts, or a history of Judaism.

– Lightstone 1994, 5

Jack Lightstone's advisement aside, New Historicism is premised on the understanding that all texts reveal elements of the environment in which they were composed. To gain a deeper understanding of a text, we must study it within its cultural context. According to the New Historicist model, a letter, a memoir, a eulogy, a novel, even a grocery list may tell us something about a particular period in history, provided we read the text "between the lines" for this sort of insight and appreciate the natural limitations of such a reading as a means of historical reconstruction.

While a text is suggestive of the context in which it was created, it is also potentially suggestive of the context in which it is used. How a text is used shapes its meaning in a particular context, and consequently how and what it might tell us about its cultural environment. If we examine a text with New Historicist eyes—for a deeper understanding of past events, for example—then we must also develop an ethnography of the text we are reading. What characterizes the social environment of the text (at the time and place under investigation)? What is the social context of writing? Of reading? How do they function within the author's (or audience's) environment?

Not all ancient and historical texts were used in the same way; we can presume that they will tell us about their environment in different ways. Yet while not all texts disguise the same or even similar political messages, and not all texts use the same tricks of disguise, we can note similar *principles* at work in terms of *how text is used* to veil political content within an oral-traditional context. In the Introduction, I reviewed the history of literacy and literacy scholarship and discussed the

relationship between writing and resistance. I then outlined James Scott's work on hidden transcripts of resistance among subordinate groups and proposed how these transcripts might be disguised within the confines of a text. I proposed how the three principles by which a subversive transcript might be disguised in a text are indicative of the particular oral-traditional environment in which the text functions. This chapter uses Daniel Boyarin's reading of tractate Avodah Zarah and martyrdom in the Babylonian Talmud in order to develop this three-principle model in detail, setting the stage for the comparative studies in the chapters that follow. Keeping in mind Lightstone's caution about the reconstructive limits of the text, I move toward an ethnography of the Babylonian Talmud, placing it within the cultural context of the rabbinic academies of fifth- and sixth-century Babylonia.<sup>197</sup> Creating an ethnography of the Talmud in this particular context enables us to consider answers to the following questions: What meaning did the martyr narratives in Avodah Zarah have for the Babylonian rabbinic academy? How does Avodah Zarah suggest contemporary cultural values and worldviews? And, ultimately, how might the tractate have been used as a vehicle for clandestine expressions of resistance to the dominant ideology of the time?

How we label a text (that is, the type of text we determine it to be) influences not only how we approach the text in order to uncover hidden meaning but also the type of meaning we are likely to find. When we read a modern historiography, for example, we expect to find an accounting of past events, presumably one with (at least) a patina of objectivity. When we read a memoir, we expect to find a

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<sup>197</sup> It is important to acknowledge how subjective this element of the investigation is: *I am choosing the cultural context in which I place the Babylonian Talmud*. That is, the Talmud does not belong within a single cultural context. Rather, it has several cultural contexts—of which the Babylonian rabbinic academy is one—and it is potentially indicative of all of these contexts, be they ancient, medieval or modern. The Talmud potentially informs us about the cultural environment of (at the very least) three groups of people: the historical subjects whose words and deeds the Talmud purports to record, the compilers and recorders of the oral traditions on which the Talmud is ostensibly based, and the fifth- and sixth-century redactors of the talmudic texts. It follows, therefore, that there are many potential ethnographies for the Babylonian Talmud, which has been used by Jews as a foundational text for more than fifteen hundred years. It is also important to note that the environment of the rabbinic academies in fifth- and sixth-century Babylonia differed from that of the earlier Palestinian rabbinic groups. The Babylonian rabbis faced different political threats, held different academic and intellectual values and were influenced by a different recent history. These factors, as well as other social and cultural variables, contributed to the unique cultural context of the Babylonian Talmud in the final stages of its redaction.

personalized view of an individual's past experiences. When we read a letter, or a will or a grocery list, we expect to find elements that we can identify as belonging to these categories. Having particular expectations of a text can encourage a deeper, concentrated analysis of the material: the reader is acutely aware of what meaning she is looking for, and her alertness sharpens her powers of observation. At the same time, however, expectations of a text can limit the investigation, encouraging the reader to see meaning where perhaps none (or other meaning) was intended, or leading her to overlook meanings that she was not expecting to find. For example, if we read the Hebrew Bible as a historiography of the Jewish people, we derive different meaning from the text from what we find when we read the Bible as a metaphorical representation of the Israelites' relationship with their God. If we read the Bible as a representation of the Israelites' relationship with God, we see a meaning very different from that attributed to the Hebrew Bible by slaves in the antebellum south—as a metaphor for a subjugated people that craves freedom from oppression.<sup>198</sup> At the same time, if we limit our expectations of meaning to *either* historiography *or* literary metaphor, we risk missing the insight and understanding that a reading for multiple meanings might encourage. This is not to say that approaching a text with particular expectations is wrong—far from it. Expectation enables us to focus our study of the text in a way that being more open to other possibilities does not: By articulating an expectation in the form of a hypothesis, we set out clear lines of investigation.<sup>199</sup> It is important, however, to take to heart the advice of Socrates, and to “know that we do not know,”<sup>200</sup> and to recognize that by articulating our expectations we also circumscribe what we are likely and not likely

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<sup>198</sup> See Scott 1990, 158.

<sup>199</sup> It should be noted here the inherent difficulty of entertaining all possible interpretations of a text if the function of writing and text within the culture under investigation is foreign to us: Our perspective is circumscribed by our own experience as members of our own (highly textual) environment. See the examples given in the Introduction about uses of writing that seem unusual to us. For example, the passage in Numbers (5:23-24) in which an adulterous woman drinks water into which a written curse has been “diluted” gives us insight into the numinous quality ascribed to text within a particular society—an insight we may not have if our previous experience does not include this mystical function of writing.

<sup>200</sup> Cf. Plato's *Apology*, 19e-21e: “... the fact is that neither of us knows anything beautiful and good, but he thinks he does know when he doesn't, and I don't know and don't think I do: so I am wiser than he is by only this trifle, that what I do not know I don't think I do.”

to accept as “evidence.”<sup>201</sup> This recognition encourages the scholar to interpret her observations within a broader context. In the words of Seth Schwartz, “It is best to be aware of what we are doing and, while not eschewing detailed examination of the evidence, at least admit our need for certain kinds of models.”<sup>202</sup> Though these models necessarily limit our interpretation of evidence to an interpretation that fits the model we have chosen to use, it also enables us to place otherwise unrelated pieces of evidence in a structural framework.<sup>203</sup>

How we read the Babylonian Talmud and the meaning we find, then, are profoundly influenced by what type of text we presume the Talmud to be. The ancient rabbinic scholars who compiled and edited the Talmud were similarly influenced: the meaning they derived from the oral-traditional material they compiled was determined by what sort of meaning they expected the material to contain, and what sort of meaning they wished to preserve and transmit. Did the ancient scholars set out to create an exegesis of Scripture? A rabbinic historiography? An encyclopedia of Jewish law and rabbinic experience? Do we expect to find in the Talmud a collection of historical rabbinic opinions? Solutions to legal dilemmas? A record of rabbinic response to political and social forces? The meaning a reader finds in the Talmud thus reflects the relationship between the expectations and intentions of the author/editor and the expectations and intentions

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<sup>201</sup> By acknowledging that we do not know how writing might function in a particular society, for example, we may be better able to recognize avenues for later investigation.

<sup>202</sup> Schwartz 2001, 2.

<sup>203</sup> A note here, then, on language. If “how we label a text” determines to some extent what meaning we find, then the language we use to frame our questions will surely also influence the results of the investigation. In all cultures there is resistance—to ideologies, to individuals, to ideas of the self, to images of the Other. It does not follow, however, that all texts express resistance. If I look for evidence of “resistance” in a text rather than, for example, “allegory,” then everything I read I will categorize as either “indicative of resistance” or “not indicative of resistance.” How, then, can I ensure that I do not find resistance *simply because I set out to look for it*? In short, I cannot. But more importantly, I am not looking for something else; *I am looking for resistance*. When I read a text without “resistance” in mind, I am likely to overlook the possibilities a text may offer for the disguise of subversive ideas if these ideas and their disguises are not immediately familiar to me from my own cultural experience. Yet if I examine a text from within a framework of resistance, turning the text this way and that, reading each line with a mind open to the possibilities for resistance and disguise, I may be more likely to recognize opportunities for the hidden expression of subversion. I must keep in mind the inherent subjectivity of the exercise, of course, but if I look for evidence of “allegory,” I am likely to find only evidence of allegory; if I wish to find resistance, I must say so.

of the reader—whether that reader is an ancient rabbinic redactor or a modern scholar.

*Setting the parameters for a talmudic ethnography*

The primary evidence we have for fifth- and sixth-century rabbinic culture, the Babylonian Talmud, is a collection of texts that are not presented as the direct reflections of fifth- and sixth-century rabbinic scholars but, rather, as the reflections of earlier historical figures.<sup>204</sup> Yet the Talmud cannot be read as a purely historiographical account, as it includes a range of events that are mystical or miraculous in nature.<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, when we study the Talmud, we do so through a contemporary lens whose telescopic perspective tends to flatten several centuries of dynamic rabbinic history into whatever can be gleaned from a few thousand pages of highly stylized commentary. To state unequivocally that “the rabbis thought *this*” or “the rabbis thought *that*” inevitably distorts the range of diverse opinions held by the rabbinic population and the timeframe during which such opinions were shaped and transmitted.

What can we learn from a text that purports to tell us of historical events and figures if we cannot rely on its historical accuracy? What can we learn about its authors, its social context and its subject? In our study of rabbinic culture through rabbinic texts, we must read the text for meaning *in addition to* that suggested by the content (i.e., the words themselves), which may or may not reflect historical events. A cultural ethnographer finds meaning in an individual’s words of greeting, but he also finds meaning in the *manner* in which a particular individual introduces himself. (Does the individual shake hands? Does he bow? Do his greetings and gestures vary according to the people involved? What might these extra-verbal cues indicate about the speaker’s cultural environment?) In a similar way, we must look for meaning in the *manner* of the rabbinic text. In his study of the culture of the

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<sup>204</sup> In this study, “Talmud” refers to the Babylonian Talmud (c. 550-650 CE), also known as the *Bavli*, unless otherwise specified. The Palestinian Talmud, or the *Yerushalmi*, was recorded earlier, likely in the fourth century.

<sup>205</sup> In the past, the rabbinic texts have been treated as historiography—enabling scholars such as Louis Finkelstein (1990 [1936]) to publish a book-length biography of Rabbi Akiva, for example—but this view has been discredited by recent scholarship (e.g., Neusner 1994 and Boyarin 1999, 1995).

Babylonian Talmud, Jeffrey Rubenstein (2003) takes direction from Clifford Geertz, who “compares the approach of the ethnographer analyzing culture to that of a literary critic analyzing a text, ‘sorting out the structures of signification ... and determining their social ground and import ... Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript.” Rubenstein goes even further than Geertz: “for the study of rabbinic culture, we might say that doing ethnography *is exactly* analyzing a text to uncover those structures of signification. The diversity of sources, the different literary strata, and the voices of sages over the course of four hundred years render the *Bavli* an excellent candidate for a type of literary ethnographic study.”<sup>206</sup>

The manner of rabbinic literature, however, is not wholly mimetic, either. While the rabbinic texts “reflect their social milieux, [they do not portray or mimic their] social context.” As Lightstone (1994) continues, there were “precious few independent witnesses to the development of early rabbinic institutions and organization.”<sup>207</sup> We must therefore presume that the compilers and editors of the Talmud were themselves profoundly influenced by both its manner and content; this in turn directed any editorial work on the texts. The challenge of the contemporary “literary ethnographer,” then, is to determine which elements of the highly stylized rabbinic texts present a fifth- or sixth-century rabbinic program of values, beliefs and practice. Because the texts were compiled and edited over centuries, part of the challenge is to determine—as far as possible—which elements of a text reflect *contemporaneous* culture (i.e., cultural elements that correspond to the redactors’ environment) and which reflect *historical* culture (i.e., elements that correspond to the talmudic subjects’ environment, or the redactors’ interpretation of the subjects’ environment). In much the same way that an archaeologist must separate stratigraphical layers in order to ascertain a historical and cultural timeline, the literary ethnographer must determine the “stratigraphy” of the text in order to compile a picture of rabbinic culture—at a single point in history or over a longer period of time.

<sup>206</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 12. Rubenstein cites Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 4-5.

<sup>207</sup> Lightstone 1994, 10.

Given the myriad variables involved, a complete and accurate ethnography of the Babylonian Talmud is very likely an unachievable goal. Yet if we wish to discern possible subtextual, disguised meanings in the text, we must understand the nature of the disguise. This requires that we be familiar with the camouflage—that is, the social (oral-traditional) environment of the text. If we do not attempt to establish a picture of this social environment, we certainly will not recognize subtextual meaning—we will not even know what, theoretically, to look for.

### Oral culture, literacy and the Rabbis

The ancient world was by and large a literate society.

– Stock 1996, 3

The great civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures.

– Van der Toorn 2007, 10

It is not very difficult to find in the current academic literature—in equal measure—the sort of statements excerpted above. It is more difficult to find scholarship that commits to the idea embodied by combining the two: “The great civilizations of the ancient world were by and large literate societies *and* oral cultures.” Though recent scholarship in orality and literacy has begun to consider the influence that oral and literate traditions might have had on each other,<sup>208</sup> much academic literature focuses on the “oral” or the “literate” of a particular culture instead of the unique developments that occur when oral and literate activities are combined—which might happen in an infinite number of creative and unanticipated ways.<sup>209</sup> What has

<sup>208</sup> For example, Bourke 1995; Carruthers 1990; Clanchy 1991 [1979]; Coleman 1996; Culley 1967; Cunningham and Kennedy 1999; Daly and Dickson 1990; Dunn 2000; Elman 1999; Foley 1996; Gerhardsson 1999; Graham 1987; McKitterick 1989, 1990; Niditch 1996; Ó Ciosáin 1997; Rubenstein 2003; Small 1997; Street 1984; and Thomas 1992, among others.

<sup>209</sup> Van der Toorn (2007, 11) writes: “Though the figures differ depending on place and period, literacy was always restricted to a small segment of society.” Emphasis is to some degree placed on oral traditions *or* literate capabilities of a particular culture, but not on the traditions derived from a particular combination of both. Van der Toorn qualifies this statement at a later point: “The fact that the civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures had an impact on the texts that were committed to writing. In Babylonia and Israel, writing was mostly used to support an oral performance. The native verbs for ‘reading’ literally mean ‘to cry, to speak out loud’ (Hebrew *qara*, Akkadian *sasu* and its by-form *sitassu*). These verbs reflect the way texts were used. Written documents were read aloud, either to an audience or to oneself. Silent reading was highly unusual .... Reading, in other words, was an

become clear to me in the course of this investigation is the need to study literacy *in conjunction with* orality: Humans have existed for thousands—perhaps millions—of years in oral communities without writing, but to our knowledge humans *have never existed in literate communities devoid of oral tradition*. Every culture employs gesture, ritual, idiom or other elements in its creation of a unique oral communications system. Our literate traditions not only reflect the surrounding oral-cultural environment but are also shaped by the oral-traditional context in which they are used. In many ways, our literacy and our texts are direct products of our oral culture. Thus, the meaning of an ancient text is determined in no small part by the nature of its oral environment. We must ask: If the great civilizations of antiquity were oral cultures, what kind of texts did they produce?<sup>210</sup>

The term *torah*, commonly translated into the English as “law” or “teaching,” is also the Hebrew name for the Five Books of Moses, corresponding to the first five books of the Protestant Old Testament.<sup>211</sup> According to biblical tradition, the Torah was revealed by God to the Israelites at Sinai (Exodus 24-34). When Jews are called the “people of the book,” the book referred to is the Torah. Yet the Torah is not the only foundational text of Judaism. The other “text” is a vast corpus of oral-traditional scriptural exegesis, folk narrative, law and commentary—in written form a total of several thousand pages greater in length than the Torah itself. This corpus makes up what is collectively called the “oral torah,”<sup>212</sup> which, among other things,

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oral activity .... Texts were for the ears rather than the eyes” (11-12). And later: “In Israel and Babylonia, texts were an extension, so to speak, of the oral performers. This is not to say that all texts were in origin oral artifacts, but that the oral delivery of the texts determined their style, even if they had originated in writing” (14).

<sup>210</sup> Ironically, the Babylonian rabbis who are the subject of this part of my investigation saw oral and literate traditions as being in direct opposition to each other and took strict pains to keep them separate. See Elman 1999. This factor, too, shapes the meaning of talmudic texts.

<sup>211</sup> Namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The *Torah* is also known as the Pentateuch (in Greek) or the Chumash (from the Hebrew *chamesh*, also meaning five). The Hebrew Bible (of which the Torah is the first of three parts) also contains Neviim (“Prophets”) and Ketuvim (“Writings”). Together, Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim (commonly known by their acronym TNK, or *Tanakh* in Hebrew) correspond more or less to the Protestant Old Testament (although the order and organization of the chapters differ somewhat).

<sup>212</sup> In Hebrew, *torah she b'al peh* (literally, “torah that is in the mouth”). The “texts” of the oral torah were memorized, transmitted and eventually recorded in written form by the early rabbis over the course of the first several centuries of the Common Era. The Babylonian Talmud, a comprehensive collection of oral law and commentary, was edited into its final form between 550 and 650 BCE.

sets out a program for living a Jewish life according to Jewish religious law, or *halakha*.<sup>213</sup>

According to rabbinic tradition, the revelation at Sinai included two *torot*: the written Torah and the oral torah, this orally transmitted compendium of Jewish tradition. Where the written Torah was preserved on scrolls, the oral torah was preserved in the memories of the sages. According to the *Mishnah*, the oldest recorded text of the oral torah (c. 200 CE), God charged Moses and his descendants to preserve the oral torah in memory and to pass it down to each successive generation by word of mouth.<sup>214</sup>

By the end of the first century BCE, most Jews no longer spoke or read Hebrew—at least not during the normal course of their day. Even in Ezra’s time,<sup>215</sup> when the Torah was read aloud to those who had returned from exile, it had to be “taught” to the general populace, who would have conversed primarily in

<sup>213</sup> *Halakha* includes biblical law (the 613 *mitzvot* or commandments), rabbinic interpretations of these laws, and other customs and traditions. Today, the Babylonian Talmud serves as the primary basis for much of contemporary Jewish law.

<sup>214</sup> Scholars have determined that Pirke Avot, the chapter in which this etiological narrative occurs, was probably added to the *Mishnah* sometime later, perhaps in 250 CE, possibly as a means of justifying the authority of the rabbinic teachers who preserved and taught the oral torah (see, e.g., Neusner 1994). The reader is given to understand that before the oral torah was written down (at various points between the third and sixth centuries) it was preserved only in the memories of the sages, *in its entirety*. Many contemporary academics agree that there are (at the very least) chronological problems with this apology, including the need to explain how, if the oral torah was revealed *in its entirety* at Sinai, it manages to comment on its own history *post-Sinai*. See, e.g., Neusner 1994, Boyarin 1999, Jaffee 2001. For the culture of the sages generally, see also Fishbane 1990, Gammie and Perdue 1990, Elman 2006, Elman and Gershoni 2000, Fraade 1990 and Urbach 1975.

<sup>215</sup> According to biblical sources, Ezra led the Babylonian exiles back to Jerusalem around the time the Temple was rebuilt. While the sources agree on a date for the First Temple’s destruction (586 BCE), the date for the building of the Second Temple it is not clear from the biblical texts. According to the books of Haggai and Zechariah, the rebuilding took place during the reign of “King Darius” (there were three kings with that name ruling over the period from approximately 522 to 330 BCE). Ezra 1-6 indicates the rebuilding process began during the reign of “Cyrus” (there were three kings named Cyrus, ruling at various times between 650 BCE and 401 BCE) but was interrupted; construction was only completed during the reign of Darius. The biblical book of Nehemiah, on the other hand, indicates that Jerusalem itself was not rebuilt or repopulated until the twentieth and twenty-first year of the reign of Artaxerxes—a date that refers either the reign of Artaxerxes I (465–25 BCE) or Artaxerxes II (405/404–359/358 BCE)—not to the reign of Artaxerxes III, which was not as long. This would place the repopulation of Jerusalem several decades *after* the rebuilding of the Temple if the reconstruction took place during a Cyrus/Darius period. Diana Edelman points out that it would make little sense for any king to go to the trouble of rebuilding a temple in a ruined and deserted city; she suggests that the Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra sources are not historically accurate; a more critical reading of the evidence should encourage us to place the reconstruction of the Temple during the reign of Artaxerxes. See Edelman 2005.

Aramaic.<sup>216</sup> By the first century BCE, the Near East was largely Hellenized, and for many Jews (especially outside of Judah), Greek was the language of daily life.<sup>217</sup> The term “Hellenized Judaism” has been used to describe the hybrid of Jewish theology and Greek philosophy that characterizes the type of biblical exegesis and legal interpretation of the time.<sup>218</sup> In Philo’s Alexandria, for example, Jewish language, Jewish social custom and the cultural framework in which Jews operated on a daily basis was suffused with Greek allegorical references, Greek idiom, Greek philosophical principles and a Greek sense of identity.<sup>219</sup>

At the turn of the millennium, the Jewish experience of text was somewhat different from our modern Western experience of text. In the ancient world, the line between what we understand as literate and what we understand as oral was often not distinct.<sup>220</sup> Though the Torah was preserved in written form, for example, most members of the Jewish population experienced the text in an oral-performative mode (as the text was read aloud in the Temple, for example). This oral performance was frequently accompanied by a rich corpus of orally delivered and (often) memorized interpretations of the text. Few people in the Second Temple period had access to the Torah scrolls themselves, and copies of the Septuagint were expensive and time-

<sup>216</sup> See, e.g., Ezra 7.

<sup>217</sup> According to Max Dimont (2003 [1962], 111-12), the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah, was “a bestseller” and could be found in more pagan households than Jewish ones.

<sup>218</sup> Although see Schwartz 2001, who rejects the term “Hellenized Judaism” as being overly general. Just as there were many “Judaisms” in the ancient world, there were also many “Hellenized Judaisms.”

<sup>219</sup> Scholars have noted similarities between classical philosophy and the intellectual environment that gave birth to the Talmud, especially concerning the roles of memory and writing. Consider the early-twentieth-century observations of Ludwig Blau (1902), who sees similarities between the Platonic rejection of writing as a danger to the memory and the rabbinic approach to study: “Plato says justly that the invention of the art of writing brought about a weakening of the memory. In the circle of the Talmudists, writing did not serve the purposes of study, memory asserted its full force in consequence” (124).

<sup>220</sup> For perspectives on the role of literacy in the biblical world, and within ancient Greco-Roman and Persian population generally, see, for example, Niditch 1996, Jonathan Boyarin 1992, Draper 2004, Bowman and Woolf 1994, Harris 1989, Havelock 1986, Small 1997, Gerhardsson 1998 [1961], Van der Toorn 2007, and Beard *et al* 1991. Even within a literate ancient city books were difficult to come by, and one did not necessarily have the opportunity to “apply” one’s literacy on a daily basis. See, for example, Rosamond McKitterick’s discussion on the economic and symbolic value of books in *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (1989). Though her discussion focuses on book production in Carolingian France, many of the ideas she presents are of interest to scholars who seek to deepen their understanding of book and text culture in a pre-print world. Her discussion on the economics of book production, including how many skins might have been involved in the creation of various biblical texts, is particularly illuminating (138-41).

consuming to produce. A great number of Jews would have experienced the Torah symbolically and aurally (rather than practically and literally) as a textual artifact. They would have seen the scrolls in the hands of the priests but not touched them, and they would have heard rather than read the written words. Thus, while the Torah was of symbolic and physical importance, it was not necessarily something that the ordinary Jew on the street would have had regular and frequent contact with. On the other hand, oral-traditional material based on Torah and its teachings may very well have been easily accessible to a wide audience.

Physical access was not the only issue, however. Limited literacy among the general population, language differences and literary content that would likely have been viewed as having little practical application in a contemporary context meant that a reading of the Torah often had to be accompanied by its interpretation (or some exegetical discussion) in order for the text to be meaningful to all. In this way, the biblical text can be seen to have served as a function of the dominant (oral) tradition rather than as a wholly literate tradition on its own.<sup>221</sup> The emphasis in the Talmud on how a particular tradition *should be transmitted* suggests that one might expect to find traditional material preserved in both written and oral forms throughout this period but that, in the opinion of the rabbinic leaders, particular traditions were to be taught and discussed in certain ways.<sup>222</sup> Even if a written text is

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<sup>221</sup> This observation is not intended to downplay the importance of the Torah as a *text* for the Jews but rather to highlight the biblical-world relationship between text and oral tradition. See Susan Niditch, whose *Oral World and Written Word* (1996) considers literacy and orality in the biblical world in terms of a "sliding scale" or what Niditch calls the "orality/literacy continuum." According to Niditch, the biblical texts give us an insight into a world that, though clearly highly literate, is shaped to a significant extent by oral-cultural tradition. Arguably the Hellenistic world should be viewed through a similar lens. Though Alexandria in the first century was a "literate" city by ancient standards, the term "literate" in this case is not the "literate" of the contemporary modern world. Reading and writing were frequently not taught in conjunction with each other, and one's contribution to society did not generally require a particular level of literacy. In any case, one's experience of the text was shaped largely by the oral-traditional environment in which one lived.

<sup>222</sup> J. Weingreen (1976) illustrates the complexity of the oral/literate distinction and the relationship of the oral to the literate in the ancient world and concludes that "the adjective *oral* refers not to the means of preserving authoritative rabbinic legalistic materials, but only to *their circulation and transmission*" (78-79, emphasis in original). A well-known talmudic source for the prohibition against writing is bGitt. 60b, which reads: "R. Judah b. Nahmani the public orator of R. Simeon b. Lakish discoursed as follows: It is written, *Write thou these words* [Exodus 34:27], and it is written, *For according to the mouth of these words*. What are we to make of this?—It means: The words which are written thou art not at liberty to say by heart, and the words transmitted orally thou art not at liberty to recite from writing. A Tanna of the school of R. Ishmael taught: [It is written]

viewed as the primary record of religious knowledge, as in the case of the written Torah, the experience of the text is not limited to experience of the *written* text: the text is complemented by an interpretive tradition, which is frequently oral.

Eventually, the interpretative tradition was so lengthy and so cumbersome that it had to be written down; the risk of losing important information was too great. Eventually, the Talmud achieved a standard written form. But as Mikliszanski (1945) argues, “the change was rather of an external character; the text that was conceived and developed in spoken words remained practically the same .... The ancient prohibition against writing down the oral law is still stressed in the written texts of the present Talmud; the written form is only, if one may say, a mnemonic device so that the text should not be forgotten.”<sup>223</sup> Gerhardsson (1998 [1961]), too, has commented on the oral nature of the written Talmud. The Talmud lends itself to memorization and recitation, using common formulas, introductory phrases, categorical organization and *simanim*, or signs (in the case of rabbinic literature, particularly mnemonic signs). As a written text, however, it is singularly awkward: The oral-traditional principles that characterize the Talmud

were not even abandoned when the Talmud underwent its final redaction and written formulation. It is well known, how eager the men behind this edition were to save space. Nevertheless, it does not normally occur to them to use their own abstract generalizations and summaries when giving account of the traditional differences of opinion between various authorities. Instead, they present the traditional discussions and decisions by repeating the words of the different Rabbis, or by quoting stories about the way in which the Rabbis acted. And they did this in spite of the fact that they were using valuable space by repeating a tradition in one single context several times—word for word.<sup>224</sup>

In the first centuries of the new millennium, a group of Jewish scholars—perhaps several groups—began to record the oral traditions of the Jews. Their successors would be the rabbinic scholars whose teachings would eventually form the backbone

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*These*: these [i.e., those in Exodus 34:27] thou mayest write, but thou mayest not write *halachoth* [i.e., the oral law]. R. Johanan said: God made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of that which was transmitted orally, as it says, *For by the mouth of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.*” (Translation by Dr. Isidore Epstein (Jews’ College, London), available at [www.comeandhear.com](http://www.comeandhear.com), accessed 3 October 2007; emphasis in original translation. Some of the additions in square brackets are mine, some are Epstein’s.)

<sup>223</sup> Mikliszanski 1945, 437.

<sup>224</sup> Gerhardsson 1998 [1961], 81.

of contemporary normative Judaism. According to tradition, the early rabbinic scholars were the Pharisees, a religious and political group of influential Jews who called for greater public participation in Jewish life, as separate from the Temple rituals carried out by the priestly class, or the Sadducees. Indeed, much of the material that makes up the oral torah emphasizes the daily life of the “everyman” Jew—his obligations regarding the laws of purity, ritual observance and social relations. As a layman’s text, then, the oral torah recalls in many ways the political and social role of the Pharisees: the Pharisees encouraged more active public participation in Jewish life, and the texts of the oral torah would seem to reflect this emphasis.

Despite what rabbinic tradition tells us about early rabbinic history, however, the real identity of these proto-rabbinic scholars of oral torah is unclear. While rabbinic tradition holds that the oral torah was revealed at Sinai along with the Ten Commandments, no text produced earlier than the *Mishnah* (c. 200 CE) actually refers to a definitive body of oral law, or to an oral revelation at Sinai.<sup>225</sup> Some contemporary historians have suggested that, like the revelation at Sinai, the traditional link made between the later rabbis and the Pharisees is more apology than historical fact, a manufactured history that roots the rabbinic tradition within an old

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<sup>225</sup> Philo speaks of “unwritten laws,” but the relationship of Philo’s “unwritten laws” to the written laws of Moses (i.e., those contained in the Decalogue and in Deuteronomy and Leviticus in the written Torah) and to what would later be known as “oral torah” is not clear. Various scholars have debated the relationship between Philo’s “unwritten law” and the idea of oral torah. Sometimes Philo’s use of “unwritten law” alludes to written law before it was written down (i.e., the Ten Commandments before they were recorded in the form we know today), and suggests that the patriarchs themselves were embodiments of this (unwritten) law. (See, e.g., *On Abraham*, I, 5: “...for these men [the patriarchs] have been living and rational laws; and the lawgiver has magnified them for two reasons; first, because he was desirous to show that the injunctions which are thus given are not inconsistent with nature; and, secondly, that he might prove that it is not very difficult or laborious for those who wish to live according to the laws established in these books, since the earliest men easily and spontaneously obeyed the unwritten principle of legislation before any one of the particular laws were written down at all. So that a man may very properly say, that the written laws are nothing more than a memorial of the life of the ancients.”) Sometimes his use of “unwritten law” suggests a connection between divine (Jewish) law (unwritten or written) and natural law. (As in, e.g., *On Abraham*, XLVI, 275: “... But God, ... says that “this man fulfilled the divine law, and all commandments of God” [Gen. 26:5], not having been taught to do so by written books, but in accordance with the unwritten law of his nature ...”). Najman (1999, 72) claims that Philo was writing in a Hellenistic environment that “denigrated writing in favor of the unwritten law of nature.” We have no evidence, however, to suggest that Philo has in mind a definitive (i.e., canonized) body of customary oral law when he discusses Jewish tradition.

and distinguished political and cultural environment.<sup>226</sup> By rooting rabbinic law in the popular Pharisaic tradition, later rabbis were able to bill their teachings as the authoritative “people’s Judaism,” separate from the Temple rituals carried out by the priestly classes, but still divinely mandated—and thus with an authority comparable to that of Torah.

What we know of the Pharisees comes to us from very few individual observers, all of whom were influenced by social and political factors and whose writing suggests personal agendas. Some scholars have argued that the historical importance of the Pharisees as a political and social force is itself a creation of contemporary ancient writers or later redactors who had particular reasons for describing the Pharisees as political and social innovators. According to this argument, the early rabbinic scholars set out to authorize a set of guidelines for Jewish practice within the rabbinic literature; to do so, they attributed their authority to their role as the successors of the Pharisees, whom they traced back through a line of sages all the way to Sinai.<sup>227</sup> As time went on and the rabbinic tradition achieved authority, this authority in turn lent a certain believable historicity to the social status and political and cultural role of the Pharisees. Thus, while the Talmud owes its authority in part to the Pharisees and the legendary link to Sinai, it also bestows upon the Pharisees and the rabbinic sages an historical role and social status that they may not otherwise have had.<sup>228</sup> This circularity, in which “the chain of tradition and the Oral Law

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<sup>226</sup> E.g., see Jaffee 2001.

<sup>227</sup> Martin Jaffee suggests that the Pharisees as a group were employed by the rabbis as the plausible link between early oral traditions and rabbinic interpretation. The rabbis were the inheritors of the “oral” Pharisaic tradition, which emphasized the oral transmission of particular interpretive traditions rather than ritualized temple service. We have no evidence before the rabbinic literature of the third and fourth centuries that the Pharisees did not write down their interpretive traditions, or that they believed certain traditions should be transmitted only by word of mouth. The only extant writing by those who might have had first-hand knowledge of the Pharisees (that is, Josephus and Paul) does not mention this alleged characteristic of Pharisaism: “The most we can say is that the Pharisees, like other Second Temple communities invested in scribal practices, are likely to have enjoyed a richly oral and aural experience of written texts, particularly those of Scripture” (Jaffee 2001, 61). See also the work of Jacob Neusner, who has suggested repeatedly that the rabbinic documents should be viewed as *reconstructions* of Jewish history. See, too, Erwin R. Goodenough (1953), who suggests that the early rabbis were not as influential as previously thought.

<sup>228</sup> See Lightstone (1994, 5), who argues that the rabbinic documents “are tendentious, party documents whose purpose is to inculcate certain perceptions of reality rather than to mirror reality.” Cf. Seth Schwartz (2001), who suggests that Jacob Neusner’s work “*historicized* rabbinic literature and reduced it to an artifact of a society in which it was in fact marginal” (8, emphasis in original). Schwartz re-examines, among other things, the evidence for Jewish unity in antiquity, and concludes

mutually reinforce each other's antiquity and authenticity," serves as the foundation for what David Biale (1986) calls "an irrefutable political theory of rabbinic power."<sup>229</sup> Not only did the early rabbis circumscribe for themselves a role as religious authorities but they also set the groundwork for their future role as political leaders.

Today, the rabbinic texts, together with additional commentary, are understood to be the authoritative interpretation of written Torah and its application to Jewish life. For most modern Jews, reconciling directives in the Torah with the realities of contemporary daily life is challenging; the biblical texts frequently require interpretation. This was also the case for Jews in the rabbinic era. In the rabbinic period, events recorded in the Torah were already several centuries passed.<sup>230</sup> Much of the Babylonian Talmud was compiled and edited at some geographical distance away from where many of the events took place. Rabbinic Judaism developed on the premise that written Torah and oral torah were bound together, not only historically at Sinai, but practically as well: that is, a literal reading of the Torah was incomplete without the interpretative understanding provided by oral torah, and by the rabbis themselves as the exclusive teachers of oral torah.

### *The Babylonian environment*

The Babylonian Jewish community was initially established when the First Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, and the Jews were scattered throughout the Middle East.<sup>231</sup> Many members of the priestly and upper classes were

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that a much more nuanced characterization of ancient Judaism (than that outlined by traditional historical models) is required. Argues Schwartz, the ancient Jews did not always perceive themselves as bound by a common spirituality and sense of nationhood (an historical model imposed on the evidence frequently by "Jewish historians ... writing from deep inside some sort of romantic nationalist ideology, nowadays usually Zionism" [5]). At the same time, however, the model of "radical diversity" is "inadequate": the focus on difference that such a model demands "neglects ancient political, demographic, and social realities. As far as politics is concerned, the empowerment of certain Jewish elites in the later Second Temple period imposed limits on acceptable variety." Schwartz suggests that although there was "necessarily a normative core of Judaism before 70 CE," this core "certainly had no special connection with the pharisaic/rabbinic Judaism regarded as normative by pre-Neusner and most Israeli scholars" (10).

<sup>229</sup> Biale 1986, 46.

<sup>230</sup> Richard Tarnas (1991, 446) places the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt in about 1250 BCE.

<sup>231</sup> This is not the only event that led to the Jews' exile from Palestine. Elias Bickerman (1988) discusses the Jewish Diaspora in his *Jews in the Greek Age*. The reasons for the wide displacement of

exiled to Babylonia. For all Jews, however—those in the Diaspora and those who remained behind in Greco-Roman Palestine—the Temple’s destruction was a blow: bereft of a physical religious centre, the Jews now committed themselves with what one author calls a “renewed zeal” to the laws of Torah,<sup>232</sup> cultivating a metaphorical temple of Jewish observance where a physical one no longer existed. With the rebuilding of the Temple in 538 BCE after Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon, many of those exiled by Nebuchadnezzar would return to Jerusalem.<sup>233</sup> But the Diaspora was now an established fact of Jewish cultural life—and the reconstructed Temple took on even more significance as a concrete and practical symbol of Jewish faith, uniting Jewish communities wherever they were. The Second Temple became an important economic, social and political centre. The biblical stories now reflected ancient history and recalled a geography, a language and a culture that in many ways was not personally familiar to most Diaspora Jews, or even to many Palestinian Jews. Temple dues, priestly rituals and public sacrifices conducted within Temple walls served to unify an otherwise diverse and far-flung group of people who self-identified as Jews.<sup>234</sup> When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans, the Jews lost for the second time in vivid cultural memory their social, geographical, religious and political centre.<sup>235</sup>

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the Jews were many and included, in addition to the Babylonian exile after 586, Sargon’s earlier transplantation of Jews to northern Mesopotamia, Sennacherib’s deportations of captive Jews to Assyria, and the transfer of Jews to Babylonia in 595 and 596 BCE.

<sup>232</sup> Grintz 1972, 946.

<sup>233</sup> An account detailed in the biblical book of Ezra.

<sup>234</sup> It is important to note here that Jews in the Second Temple period were not a unified, homogenous group. Seth Schwartz (2001) speaks of many Judaisms, of which “Hellenistic Judaism”—as practiced by Philo, for example—was only one. (Indeed, Schwartz points out that “Hellenistic Judaism” is itself a misnomer, embracing a range of Jewish beliefs and practices influenced to varying degrees by Hellenistic philosophy and culture.) During the Second Temple period, Jews were already scattered throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean; arguably the Second Temple was not only the physical and geographical centre of the Jewish world but served as a recognizable and unifying, “nationalizing” symbol as well. A Jew from Alexandria and a Jew from Babylon may not have spoken the same language, experienced the same degree of persecution or tolerance, or understood the same philosophy, but they each would have paid Temple dues and made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to take part in or witness Temple rituals. To a significant extent, Jews who were not a unified cultural group were at least unified in their experience and reverence for the Temple at Jerusalem and the activities that the Temple represented.

<sup>235</sup> One of the primary sources for the final years and destruction of the Second Temple is Josephus (*The Jewish War*). Flavius Josephus was a Jewish military leader and Torah scholar at the outbreak of the Jewish War (66 CE). He orchestrated his survival and surrender to the Romans at the expense of the lives of many of his own men. He found favour with the emperor and wrote his account of the

With the Second Temple's destruction, Jews who had been bound together by the physicality of the Temple space were once more linked only by their common memory of it. The Temple priests lost their religious function and their political and social roles, and the doors were opened for new cultural and spiritual leadership. The one remaining symbolic and physical cultural link the Jews had with each other—the Torah—was potentially a tenuous one: The written law was in a language that many Jews were no longer familiar with; it required translation and interpretation. But the meaning of a book to a farmer in the Upper Galilee might be very different from the meaning of the same book to a Babylonian nobleman. Potentially, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Torah could have been interpreted and reinterpreted by successive generations of Jews to the point that within a few centuries, no two Torahs need have looked very much alike. Enter the Pharisees, a populist group that sought to wrest political power from the more conservative Sadducees, the religious authorities who performed the bulk of Temple rituals.<sup>236</sup>

The Pharisees began compiling the teachings of the oral torah and presented it as the

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Jewish War under the emperor's patronage. (See Josephus, *Life*; Josephus, *War*; see also Shalit 1972, 251-53). In any event, Josephus was, among other things, a clever politician; *The Jewish War* should probably be read as a calculated, politically strategic document. Though it is the most comprehensive "contemporary-witness" account available, there are various discrepancies between Josephus' version of events and other accounts. For example, Josephus dates the destruction to 10 Av, 70 CE, while the Babylonian Talmud indicates it was 9 Av (Ta'an. 29a). Josephus states that Titus did not wish to destroy the Temple and that the final conflagration was accidentally set by a Roman soldier (*War* 6: 241). Another source (perhaps based on Tacitus [see Avi-Yonah 1972, 959]) indicates that Titus ordered the destruction of the Temple himself.

<sup>236</sup> The Pharisees were one of several religio-political factions active at the turn of the millennium. Along with the Sadducees (a conservative priestly class composed primarily of Temple priests, wealthy merchants and aristocrats), the Zealots (a self-titled group of resistance fighters who refused to submit to foreign rule; Josephus blames the Zealots for the uprising in 66 CE that would eventually lead to the destruction of the Temple in 70 [see *War* 4]), and a group of messianic Jews who followed the teachings of Jesus, the Pharisees jockeyed for political support and religious authority, promoting their brand of Judaism, which emphasized messianism, the free will of man to choose to do good or evil, and resurrection of the dead. The similarities between these precepts and those that characterize the movement that would later become Christianity have been noted by many; arguably such similarities between the two groups contributed to the vitriol apparent in their later invectives against each other. Were they more different, the two groups may not have felt so threatened by one another. On the other hand, as Akenson (1998) points out, slugging was the commonest form of flattery in the ancient Middle East, and vitriol and invective between political and religious factions of the time are perhaps simply to be expected.

The Pharisees rejected the idea that the Temple was the only place to worship God. If God was everywhere, they reasoned, then He could be worshiped anywhere—not simply via a program of Temple sacrifice that placed power and authority in the hands of the Sadducees. The Pharisaic doctrine threatened to undermine the role of the priests and earned the Pharisees distinction as a "democratic," popularly minded religious movement.

authoritative interpretation of Scripture.<sup>237</sup> The culmination of this project over several hundred years by several generations of rabbinic scholars was the Babylonian Talmud, which sets guidelines for religious observance, legal practice and social conduct. Above all, the Talmud sets out the political program of the rabbis, from the mode of political discourse to the role of the Jews as a social and political community. David Biale (1986) largely credits this political program of the rabbis with the long-term survival of Judaism and Jewish culture, even in the face of social and political domination, arguing that by creating a Jewish life without a Temple, the rabbis “laid the foundation for a decentralized political existence under Christianity and Islam.”<sup>238</sup>

In essence, the rabbis who compiled and edited the oral traditions were not simply religious figures; they were social and political leaders. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, in addition to developing what would become the authoritative interpretation of Scripture and religious law, the rabbis forged a theory of practical social governance, devising what in modern-day terms might be akin to foreign and domestic policy. In the Babylonian Talmud, we find guidelines not only for interacting with one’s social peers and superiors, but also for relating to one’s imperial overseers and political rivals. When we examine the Talmud for evidence of the surrounding social environment, we must approach it not simply as a religious document, but as a social and, ultimately, political text.

While the Jewish population in Palestine dealt with the aftermath of the Jewish War and adjusted to the new Roman order, aftershocks rippled northward to Babylonia. Those members of the largely wealthy, upper-class population of Jewish exiles who had elected to stay in Babylonia when Cyrus decreed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE had, over centuries, achieved prominent, influential positions in Babylonian society. Under Alexander the Great and Macedonian Selucid rule (following the death of Alexander in 323 BCE), the Greeks

<sup>237</sup> Although see discussions elsewhere in this chapter about uncertainty regarding the identity of these early rabbinic scholars.

<sup>238</sup> Biale 1986, 27. Cf. Neusner (1987), who attributes this evolution in part to the rabbinic writings that came out of the post-Second Temple period: “Judaism expressed by the writings of the sages of the Land of Israel in the fourth century—the age of Constantine—not only responded to issues raised for Israel by the political triumph of Christianity but did so in a way that, intellectually at least, made possible the entire future history of Judaism in Europe and beyond” (x-xi).

and the Jews developed a mutual respect. Josephus tells us that Alexander the Great affirmed the privileges accorded to the Jews under Persian rule.<sup>239</sup> Jews served in Greek armies and, on at least one occasion, were reported to have been excused from this service on religious grounds.<sup>240</sup> It is not wholly clear how Babylonian Jews felt toward Palestine in the Second Temple period, but as Willard Oxtoby (1972) points out, their loyalties likely lay elsewhere: “Babylonian silence during the Maccabean uprising in Palestine [first century BCE] suggests that to the end of Seleucid rule, loyalties were determined with reference primarily to local rather than distant conditions.”<sup>241</sup>

Under Parthian rule, the Jews again fared reasonably well. The Parthians were a military aristocracy and had a vested interest in fostering support among local populations. Brief comments in the Talmud suggest that a group of Jewish noblemen in Parthian Babylonian society was familiar with Parthian culture and bureaucracy as well as rabbinic legal tradition and authority, and that these Jews wielded a significant amount of influence in both Parthian government and the Jewish community. The Babylonian Jews did little to support the Palestinian Jews in their uprising against the Romans prior to 70 CE. They demonstrated no interest in the later Bar Kokhba Revolt against the Romans (132-135 CE). On the other hand, the Babylonian Jews did fight against Trajan when he invaded the Jewish-occupied territories in the Parthian Empire in 114. There are, however, references to Babylonian pilgrimage during the time of the Second Temple, and evidence suggests that the Babylonian Jews used the Jewish calendar as laid out by the Temple priests. Jacob Neusner (1972) argues that the loyalty of the Babylonian Jews as *Jews* was to Jerusalem, the Torah and the Temple cult—not to Palestine as a Jewish homeland.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> *Antiquities* 11: 338.

<sup>240</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:192.

<sup>241</sup> Oxtoby 1972, 36.

<sup>242</sup> For this argument and its development over the following paragraphs, see Neusner 1972, 36-39. See, however, David Biale (1986, 26-27), who seems to present a more nuanced perspective: “... in terms of political sovereignty, the subsequent period of rabbinic rule [i.e., after the destruction of the Temple] meant no fundamental change in the governance of the Land of Israel, even after the Bar Kokhba rebellion. The Jewish authorities in Palestine continued to enjoy the respect of the Diaspora Jews, even though the Temple no longer stood as the recipient of donations.”

If Neusner's argument is correct, then it is hardly surprising that prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, Pharisaic (later, rabbinic) Judaism seems not to have made many inroads into the Babylonian Jewish world. If the Babylonian Jews' loyalty to Jerusalem was premised on their loyalty to the Temple cult and its priestly leaders, then an upstart group of politically minded rabbis whose interpretation of the Torah was a potential threat to traditional priestly power and authority likely would not have met with much favour across the Euphrates River. When the Bar Kokhba Revolt failed, rabbinic leaders fled from Palestine northward and began to establish the academies that would eventually produce the Babylonian Talmud. As more Babylonian-born Jews enrolled in academies established by Palestinian refugees, rabbinic discourse and interpretation of oral torah and Scripture found greater acceptance: Students trained in the art of rabbinic dialectic made good lawyers and statesmen. At this time there seems to have been a power shift in Babylonian Jewish circles, as academy-educated Jews replaced the Babylonian-born Jewish nobility in government and leadership roles. This power shift might also help explain the changing attitude toward the Pharisaic religious and political program: the doctrines of free will, personal worship and resurrection—and the political limits of God and divine dispensation—were appealing prospects to the “new Jew.”

By the time the Parthian dynasty fell (in 224 CE), the rabbis and their oral-torah teachings had contributed significantly to Babylonian society. Babylonian Jews had benefited from religious and political autonomy under Parthian rule and had taken advantage of secure trade routes and a strong economy to establish a comfortable existence with their imperial overseers. Jews occupied positions in various levels of government and made strong economic and political allies. The fall of the last Parthian ruler was felt so keenly amongst the rabbinic population that it receives a line in the Babylonian Talmud: When Artaban V dies, Rav cries, “The bond is parted!”<sup>243</sup> As Neusner (1972) points out, this event did indeed mark the end of “the ancient alliance” between Iran and Israel.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Avodah Zarah 10b-11a.

<sup>244</sup> Neusner 1972, 39.

Unlike their Parthian forebears, who governed with a light hand and preferred local leaders as intermediaries, the Sasanians set up administrative offices “on the ground” and revoked Jews’ self-government. The Sasanians sought to convert Babylonia to the worship of the ancient Persian deities they held sacred. Any population that did not abide by the guidelines of the new Sasanian religious institutions was at risk. By 242, however, it was clear that the resulting social and political unrest was a threat to dynastic stability. In an attempt to unify a divided population, Shapur I granted religious and cultural freedom to all people in the empire. But he was succeeded by a series of rulers who reversed his lenient policies. Life became progressively more dangerous for Jews, Christians, Manichaeans—any member of the non-Mazdean religions. Neusner points out that the Jews suffered less than the Manichaeans and the Christians (who were routinely martyred, their religious centres destroyed), but there is little doubt that the Babylonian empire had become a dangerous place for minorities, Jew and gentile alike. This unstable political and social environment had a profound influence on the character of the Babylonian Talmud. Self-definition, self-protection and self-respect within these volatile circumstances were of paramount importance. The task of the Talmud’s redactors, then, was threefold: not only did they set out to preserve a history of the Jewish people, but they also preserved the definition of the Jewish people and blueprinted a method for maintaining a Jewish identity even within hostile and unpredictable environments.

Over the next several centuries, arrests, forced conversions, the destruction of synagogues, the prohibition of Torah study, and executions were increasingly frequent—if irregular—occurrences. A few Sasanian rulers established brief windows of political calm, but overall Babylonian Jews did not breathe easily again until late in the sixth century CE, with the reign of Chosroes Parwez (590-628), who would lead an invasion of Palestine in 624 and be welcomed by Palestinian Jews.

### *The Babylonian Talmud*

The challenges we face when we try to piece together an ethnography of the Talmud should now be clearer. The destruction of the Second Temple propelled a series of

events that fuelled an already vibrant and sometimes volatile political and religious context. The Temple religion no longer had a temple, nor did it have a place to house its Torah. Several Temple factions struggled to achieve doctrinal and ritual authority and to ascertain the theological meaning of unfolding circumstances and events. Outside political entities threatened further domination and suppression. Witnesses to these events—contemporary witnesses as well as later historians—were themselves swayed by political and social agendas. And outside of Judaea, Diaspora Jews had for many centuries lived a very different life from their Palestinian counterparts; this in turn would shape their interpretation of the biblical texts and the old oral traditions.

Unlike the Jews of Palestine, the Babylonian Jews had long existed without a physical Temple. Throughout the Second Temple period, for Babylonian Jews the Temple was largely a symbolic rather than experiential representation of Jewish identity.<sup>245</sup> The Jews of Babylon, like other Diaspora Jews, had to interact, conduct business with and live alongside non-Jews. If they wished to establish contact with other Jewish communities, they had to travel across non-Jewish territories in order to do so.<sup>246</sup> For the most part, the Pharisaic perception of God made sense to Babylonian Jews: That is, God was accessible beyond the Temple walls. If He was accessible only in the Temple, then He was available only to the Jews in Jerusalem and not to the Jews in Babylonia. How much more attractive a God Who goes wherever the Jew goes! For the Diaspora Jew, the sacred “had its loci on earth at the many sites and in the diverse persons where conduits from heaven above broke into this earthly realm ... Hence, sacred space on earth, like social space, lacked homogeneity and contiguity; the map of the sacred, to put matters differently, had the same topographical features as the social map of Jewry.”<sup>247</sup> And how much more attractive a God Who does not mete out divine punishment in the form of exile from Jerusalem! According to the Pharisaic understanding of Mosaic Law, the Jews of

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<sup>245</sup> One could argue that the Vatican and the pope are to modern-day Catholics what the high priest and the Second Temple were to the ancient Diaspora. Even this analogy suffices only poorly, however, as modern-day media and communications systems render the “personal” connection between an individual Catholic and Pope Benedict XVI of potentially much greater significance than any relationship between a Babylonian Jew and the Second Temple priests.

<sup>246</sup> Lightstone 1994, 262-63.

<sup>247</sup> Lightstone, 263.

Babylon were no less “chosen” than the Jews of Jerusalem: All Jews were chosen by God to follow Torah, irrespective of their geographical location, their political associations, their economic prosperity or their social status.

Considering the differences between the Palestinian and Babylonian contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that we have two Talmuds: the Babylonian Talmud, or the *Bavli* (c. 550-600 CE in Babylonia—hence its name) and the Palestinian Talmud (or *Yerushalmi*, from “Jerusalem,” c. 350-400 CE).<sup>248</sup> While both texts draw on the same traditional material, the form of argumentation and the features included in each are quite different. The Babylonian Talmud is generally considered to be the more poetic and polished text (perhaps suggesting a longer period of textual redaction and conscious editorial design); includes a significant amount of “anonymous” material in addition to material attributed to various traditional or historical figures; places greater emphasis on dialectic and the form of logical disputation; and reflects different cultural elements, which (as discussed below) suggest the social context of the rabbinic academy. It is not clear if the authors of the Babylonian Talmud had access to the Palestinian Talmud as a source document, or whether both Talmuds simply refer to the same traditional source material, with the final form of the Babylonian Talmud owing little or nothing to the Palestinian Talmud as a textual source document. Both comment on the same material, ask similar questions and organize information in much the same way; as Jacob Neusner (1994) points out, however, though the two Talmuds “exhibit traits of shared literary policy,”<sup>249</sup> they are not otherwise very alike. While they follow more or less the same program, the manner in which each does so is largely individual; it is most useful to view the two works as separate entities, or, in the words of Neusner again, two species of the genus *talmud*.<sup>250</sup> Despite their differences, it is clear that each Talmud derives from earlier source material—indeed, the *same* earlier source material.<sup>251</sup> At the same time, neither Talmud is a purely historical document: the form and content of each speaks to the environment in which the material was

<sup>248</sup> Generally the Babylonian Talmud is considered by Jews today to be the definitive *Talmud*. In this paper, my use of *Talmud* refers to the Babylonian Talmud, unless I have indicated otherwise.

<sup>249</sup> Neusner 1994, 156.

<sup>250</sup> Neusner 1994, 157.

<sup>251</sup> E.g., the Torah, the *Mishnah* and another early rabbinic document, the *Tosefta*, c. 300).

preserved and transmitted, not simply the environment in which the documented events presumably occurred.

To complicate matters further, not only is the Babylonian Talmud a repository of various rabbinic cultural elements, but it is a repository of *interpretations* of those cultural elements by various contributors over time. The Talmud presents interpretations of Jewish law by ancient scholars as well as attributed and anonymous commentary on those interpretations. Disagreements and inconsistencies in the text are often not resolved—quite the opposite, they are intentionally and carefully preserved—and, indeed, the apparent meaning of a single *sugyah* (a discrete talmudic episode) interpreted alone may be quite different from its meaning when it is read in conjunction with other seemingly self-contained episodes within the text.<sup>252</sup>

With so many variables in its compilation, preservation and transmission, how can we read the Talmud as anything other than a collection of rabbinic dialogues on legal matters—arguably its most obvious purpose? In order to uncover meaning not immediately discernible to the unsuspecting reader, we must engage in what James Scott calls a “suspicious reading” of the text. A suspicious reading of the Babylonian Talmud should suggest to us how the talmudic redactors’ interpretation of older material might reflect the character of the environment in which they lived and worked. Jeffrey Rubenstein’s (2003) suspicious reading of the Babylonian text provides a window onto the culture of the Babylonian rabbinic community. Rubenstein argues that the social and cultural differences in redaction environments account for many of the structural and stylistic differences between the Palestinian Talmud (edited into its final form by rabbis in Roman Palestine, under intermittent

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<sup>252</sup> Daniel Boyarin (1999) makes this case clearly in his reading of martyrdom in the Babylonian Talmud. It is possible to understand from Elazar’s adroit dodge and Eliezer’s even more wily escape from certain martyrdom that the text’s authors consciously distance themselves from the Christian martyrs whose deaths are glorified in the writings of the Fathers—in effect suggesting that, for the Jews, any means taken to avoid death are acceptable because a Jew cannot very well serve God in the way he is meant to if he is dead. But as Boyarin notes, the Babylonian Talmud refuses to “sit still” on this issue: when we read the tales of Elazar and Eliezer in conjunction with the martyrdom of Hanina and Akiva, the Jewish view on definitive self-sacrifice is no longer so clear. Read together, a possible interpretation of these passages is that Hanina and Akiva both accept the path that God has laid out for them, while Elazar and Eliezer use their wits to avoid the path God has chosen. See the discussion below.

persecution and facing an increasing threat of Christianization<sup>253</sup>) and the Babylonian Talmud (edited in the rabbinic academies of Babylonia as much as three hundred years later, under different political and cultural pressures).

While the material attributed to named sages in both Talmuds is much the same, Rubenstein proposes that the Babylonian Talmud's anonymous material (i.e., material not attributed to named sages) provides us with clues to the Babylonian redactors' cultural environment. Following on earlier arguments by David Weiss Halivni (1986), Rubenstein suggests that the Babylonian Talmud's anonymous material was created by the *Stammaim* (from *stam hatalmud*, or "anonymous Talmud"), a group of anonymous rabbinic editors who preserved and recorded the Talmud within the rabbinic academies of Babylonia. By examining the form these anonymous sections take, we can begin to paint a picture of fifth- and sixth-century rabbinic life in Babylonia—at the very least how it differs from third-century rabbinic life in Roman Palestine.

There are (at least) two approaches that we can take in a suspicious reading of the Babylonian Talmud for evidence of its social context. First, we can use a comparative method: We can do as Rubenstein has done and engage in a suspicious reading of passages from the Babylonian Talmud and passages from the Palestinian Talmud and suggest how the two environments differ from each other and how these differences contribute to our picture of the whole. We could also undertake a comparative reading of the Babylonian Talmud and contemporaneous pieces written by non-rabbinical writers and non-Jews, providing other perspectives on contemporary social and political circumstances. Daniel Boyarin (1999) uses this approach in his quest to understand ancient cultural perspectives on martyrdom,<sup>254</sup> engaging in a suspicious, line-by-line reading of the Babylonian Talmud and the patristic literature, and applying some of the same techniques the rabbis used in their interpretation of Scripture and Jewish law in a suspicious reading of the talmudic

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<sup>253</sup> See especially Schwartz 2001, Chapter 6.

<sup>254</sup> In this study, Boyarin compares the differences he finds between the earlier and later Talmuds with the differences he finds between the Talmud and early patristic literature. See the discussion below.

text itself.<sup>255</sup> I consider both of these methods, and the work of the scholars who have applied them, in order to arrive at some over-arching principles for recognizing and interpreting subtextual political messages within the talmudic literature, especially as it reflects the oral-traditional environment of the rabbinic academy.

### **The social and political context of the Babylonian Talmud**

From the writings of Josephus, Philo and other non-Jewish Greek and Roman writers<sup>256</sup> we know that philosophical and theological discourse was common in the Middle East at the turn of the millennium. The political and religious beliefs of those who identified themselves as Jews in the Second Temple period were diverse. There was not always agreement on the correct interpretation of Jewish law, as the legendary conflict between the priestly Sadducees and the more democratically minded Pharisees illustrates well.<sup>257</sup> Interpretation was (and is) a product of social environment, as Rubenstein (2003) points out: “In antiquity biographical anecdotes, historical accounts, and other narratives were not preserved out of a dispassionate interest in history or biography .... Authors wrote, and storytellers told, stories in order to instruct their audience, to teach morals, to stake claims, and to provide positive and negative models. Stories accordingly had to be relevant to the audience and the audience’s situation, values, conflicts, and struggles or they would not be transmitted or preserved.”<sup>258</sup> Explanations and interpretations of difficult text must suit the time and the cultural conditions if they are to offer meaningful insight into contemporary circumstances, and be preserved (that is, remembered) and passed on to future generations.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> This line-by-line method has been applied by Lightstone (1994), Neusner (1995) and Boyarin (1999, 1994), among others.

<sup>256</sup> E.g., Tertullian.

<sup>257</sup> Though note, as suggested elsewhere, that these groups and the nature of their conflict may also serve particular apologetic purposes in the rabbinic literature—and for later political and religious reasons, the more clearly articulated the conflict, the better (see Jaffee 2001 throughout, for example, particularly at 61).

<sup>258</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 6.

<sup>259</sup> Gerhardsen (1998 [1961]) suggests that the role of oral torah was not simply interpretive: “We ought perhaps also to point out here that it is not entirely satisfactory, from a historical point of view, to say that the oral Torah merely had an interpretative *function*. It is nearer to the truth to say that the

In the process of oral-traditional interpretation of a fixed text, the Babylonian rabbinical teachers placed an even greater emphasis on oral study than did their Palestinian counterparts.<sup>260</sup> In the rabbinic academies of Babylonia, the oral law was memorized, “imprinted on the memory ready formulated, ... kept alive by constant repetition.”<sup>261</sup> The name given to the rabbinic oral tradition, *torah she b'al peh* (torah that is in the mouth), suggests the form of its transmission, which “means, in the first place, the process of faithful repetition [*shamah*] of a saying or a narrative by which the receiver is enabled faithfully to reproduce it himself: ‘putting the words into his mouth.’ To this is added—if the transmission is to be thorough—the commentaries and interpretation which the statement requires.”<sup>262</sup>

Writing played an important but marginal role, and was limited to “scriptural texts, deeds and documents, and amulets—to the exclusion of the (orally transmitted) legal texts and analyses which were the warp and woof of rabbinic learning. Whatever reports we have of written notes—even in the Babylonian Talmud—refer to Palestinian venues. Thus, while literacy was universal within rabbinic circles, a scholar could function without having to commit his work to writing.”<sup>263</sup> It is likely that Babylonian rabbinic scholars functioned largely without

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oral Torah, when compared with the written, had an interpretative, particularizing, complementary and sometimes modifying function” (83).

<sup>260</sup> The prohibition on writing down the oral traditions also seems to have been much more rigidly observed in Babylonia than in Palestine (see, e.g., Rubenstein 2003, Elman and Gershoni 2000).

<sup>261</sup> Gerhardsson 1998 [1961], 81.

<sup>262</sup> Gerhardsson 1998 [1961], 81. “Mishnah” is from the root letters *shin*, *nun* and *heh*, meaning “repeat”; “Talmud” derives from the roots *lamed*, *mem* and *dalet*, meaning “study.” We know from rabbinic history that study was conducted in the rabbinic academies primarily in the form of oral discussion. See discussions throughout this section.

<sup>263</sup> Elman and Gershoni 2000, 6. There is still significant debate about how far one can characterize the Talmud as an “oral text”—that is, how much the form of the Talmud is indicative of an (older) oral style or of its oral composition and transmission: “While some contemporary scholars point to the presence of features commonly recognized as characteristic of oral transmission, namely, ring structures (the structuring of narrative elements in chiasmic patterns and the like), the use of symbolic numbers to organize heterogeneous data, recurrent phrases and distinctive syntax, as well as the formulaic use of language in the major classical rabbinic texts—the Mishnah and the two Talmuds—others insist that these forms cannot be viewed as more than stylistic survivals from an earlier era, and that these texts were composed and transmitted in written form” (Elman and Gershoni 2000, 6). I do not intend to wade into this debate. I do, however, presume that the written form of the Talmud we have today belies the oral culture of fifth- and sixth-century Babylonia. This view is supported by the observations of Paul Mandel: “Even if and when written exemplars of a text were available, it is not the text existent as a separate “work” which is recognized and cited in the ancient academy or study session, but the individual element—be it *baraita*, rabbinic comment, parable or anecdote—which is the subject of study and discussion, in a predominantly *oral* setting. Thus, nowhere in any work of the

written texts; we have little to indicate that writing, reading and oral discussion took place at the same time. While the rabbis could read, they did not tend to do so during legal and theological discussions. At any rate, it would have been exceedingly awkward to do so, given the rapid repartee of rabbinic debates and the unwieldy form of written documents at the time. There is also little evidence to suggest that the rabbis were generally well versed in the scribal arts; a rabbinic scholar had to be able to read, but not, apparently, to write.<sup>264</sup> Thus, while rabbinic texts were transmitted both orally and in writing, “the two forms of transmission did not exist side by side within the same cultural context. In Babylonia, where orality predominated, transmission of texts was oral; even when written exemplars were available, as in the case of Scripture, much was quoted by heart.”<sup>265</sup>

Elman uses the term “pervasive orality” to describe the era of Babylonian rabbinism, in which reading was common and writing was known, but neither played an important role in the daily lives of the rabbinic scholars.<sup>266</sup> These scholars were frequently also the redactors of the Talmud, but they went about their work very differently from editors today. Just as exegesis of Scripture was conducted within a dialectical context (as indicated by the exegesis conducted in dialogue style within the body of the Talmud itself), the bulk of editorial work in the academy likely took place orally. The fact that the rabbis chose to structure their interpretations in dialogue form suggests that this was the form most likely to be remembered, nurtured and transmitted. According to Elman (1999), the proof for this argument is in part the format of modern-day Talmud study: “many traditional

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classic rabbinic corpus is any rabbinic citation preceded by an indication of the source of the text; rather, passages are introduced by such phrases as ‘it is taught,’ ... ‘they said,’ etc.” (Mandel 2000, 77, emphasis in original).

<sup>264</sup> Or, as Elman (1999) sums up: “scribes produced legal documents, not sages” (56).

<sup>265</sup> Elman and Gershoni 2000, 9. The authors also note that many of the variants in the Babylonian Talmud seem to be the product of errors “of association or hearing, rather than ‘scribal’ in nature” (Elman and Gershoni 2000, 9). Although note Elman’s (1999) caution: “... it is clear from studies of oral literature in other cultures that we cannot assume that the patterning typical of oral composition (formulaic language, mnemonics as part of the text, ring-cycles, chiasmic structures of various sorts, the use of the number “three” as an organizing principle, and so on) invariably indicates oral transmission” (59).

<sup>266</sup> Elman 1999, 53.

Talmud scholars carry huge amounts of such material in their heads, to be deployed when necessary at a moment's notice."<sup>267</sup>

Jack Lightstone (1994) agrees that the dialogue form that appears in the Talmud likely is representative not only of the form of the discussions that actually took place in the rabbinic academy but of the sort of dialectic style to which a rabbi might aspire. Lightstone argues that the authoritative texts of a particular community serve also as an "authoritative model for speech": To speak like a rabbi or to speak like a rabbinic text may "attest to the interpreter's learning, representing years of study of the canonical documents." Lightstone also suggests that a "correspondence between literary style and human speech" bestows upon the speaker the authority of the canon, and the fact that the rabbis shared a "pattern of discourse, mimicking that of the canonical literature" served to distinguish them as a "distinctive class of religious virtuosi" within the Babylonian environment—a fact that would encourage the perpetuation of these rabbinic practices.<sup>268</sup> Jacob Neusner (1994) argues a similar point from another perspective. The text of the Talmud gives us a window onto the oral-cultural rabbinic academy: "For writing, as people now appreciate, not only sets forth messages through the statement of propositions. Writing also bears signification through how things are said, indeed, perhaps in a more effective and profound way than through what is said."<sup>269</sup> In other words, we can determine much about the culture of the Babylonian Talmud not only from the content of the Talmud but also from the manner in which it is presented.

### *The Talmud as a political text*

It has been assumed that, following the destruction of the Temple, the Jews abandoned politics and, in the absence of a political life, developed no political theories. The legal system known as *halakhah* that the rabbis developed in the centuries after 70 CE is taken to be devoid of political impulses.

– Biale 1986, 34

David Biale's (1986) observation prefaces his argument that the Talmud is, above all, a political text. While the Talmud sets out legal and religious law and

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<sup>267</sup> Elman 1999, 53-54.

<sup>268</sup> Lightstone 1994, 10.

<sup>269</sup> Neusner 1994, 186.

interpretation, and serves to some extent as a cultural memory “warehouse” of the Jewish people,<sup>270</sup> Biale suggests that it was created largely for political purposes and preserves the political theory and program of the rabbinical leaders. The Talmud grew out of a highly charged political context. It not only justifies the leadership role the rabbis assumed within that context but it also sets out parameters for a new political reality: the Diaspora. On one hand, Biale points out, the exile was “viewed as a period of abject powerlessness” (in contrast to a perceived past “golden age” of Jewish sovereignty). With the Temple destroyed and the Jewish population (at least the influential Jewish leadership) scattered, the Jews lost their traditional social, political and religious nucleus. On the other hand, the Jews in Babylonia would wield at various times significant political power (albeit within a non-sovereign context) for much of the period following the destruction of the Second Temple until the close of the Talmud between 500 and 600 CE. The duality of power and powerlessness “explains why rabbinic ... literature contains both a theology of powerlessness and a political theory of Jewish power.” This “theology of powerlessness” explains the relative lack of Jewish autonomy (e.g., the destruction of the Second Temple is God’s punishment for the inequities of the Jews); the “political theory of Jewish power” explains “the actual power the Jews possessed, both of internal self-government and in the larger societies in which they lived.” Together, they comprise what Biale calls the “political theory of the Diaspora.”<sup>271</sup> The Talmud lays out how to be a Jew amongst one’s fellow Jews, but it also sets out guidelines for life within an imperial context amongst non-Jews.

How did the rabbis create for themselves a role as the new Jewish authorities now that the Temple was gone? Why did the Jewish people not continue to seek out the authority of the traditional priestly leaders? No doubt some still did, even though

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<sup>270</sup> Cf. Eric Havelock (1986), who uses the term memory-storage “warehouse” to describe the function that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* served for the ancient Greeks. In a primarily oral culture, or a culture that retains a high degree of oral-traditional communication, cultural details, histories and interpretations must be preserved in a manner that enables their easy transmission and retrieval. In ancient Greece, much cultural information was “stored” in poetry. In the rabbinic communities of Israel and Babylonia, cultural information was “stored” in the Talmud and other rabbinic traditions (which were written down only several centuries after they were first compiled or composed, and which—even after they were recorded—were transmitted in a largely oral environment).

<sup>271</sup> Biale 1986, 34-35.

there was no longer a need for the priests to conduct Temple rituals; it is not likely that several hundred years of popular reverence for priestly service would crumble along with the walls of the Temple. But we also know that the landscape of Jewish worship had been irrevocably altered. God's altar was no more, God's Temple was no more: to some it must have seemed that the very covenant between God and the Jews was threatened. It was this general sense of dislocation and despair that inspired what Biale calls the rabbis deliberate "radical transformation" of the role of God. Without the Temple, there could be no prophecy; God was now "in exile with His people," no longer the Divine Ruler of all earthly events. This argument was not wholly new; it built on traditions popular even in the Second Temple period, that God played no role in the affairs of men:

The books of the Maccabees and the books of Esther and Judith, for example, leave God entirely out of their stories .... this idea became important in establishing rabbinic hegemony in interpreting the law. This new theology, which existed side by side with the old prophetic doctrine of divine punishment, created a bold opening for human activity. If God's intervention in history had come into doubt, it might now be possible for the Jews to take political action without direct divine dispensation.<sup>272</sup>

The rabbis did not speak for God. Instead, they spoke as men, for men, interpreting the words of God. But how to convince the Jewish population that they were the best qualified to interpret the words of God? The rabbis taught that their interpretive authority had been handed down to them in a long chain of tradition by Moses himself—not by any new Divine dispensation (which, the rabbis now argued, no longer existed). Biale recalls a well-known talmudic narrative that illustrates this extraordinary rabbinic argument, complete with God's acknowledgment of the new rabbinic authority:

A majority of rabbis take a certain position and are opposed by Rabbi Eliezer, who calls upon a series of divine miracles to prove that God Himself is on his side. The majority rejects this procedure out of hand: "It [the Torah] is not in the heavens" and "We do not pay attention to a heavenly voice [*bat kol*]." The passage ends with God laughing and exclaiming, "My sons have vanquished me." Here, then, is a legend that paradoxically invokes divine authority for the rejection of divine intervention in legal decisions. Once the Written and Oral

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<sup>272</sup> Biale 1986, 36-37.

Law were given, God was no longer necessary for the process of interpretation.<sup>273</sup>

If we wish to explore this evolution of the political Talmud in greater detail, we must examine more closely the social and political circumstances at a pivotal time in the history of the Jews: In the words of historian Donald Akenson (1998), “A temple religion without a temple either had to die or re-invent itself.”<sup>274</sup> This was not the first ideological and theological crisis of its kind. When the First Temple was destroyed, “The practices of Temple worship were written down and the architecture of Solomon’s Temple was memorialized, so that even if the Temple were never to be rebuilt on the surface of the earth, it could be rebuilt in the mind of Yahweh’s followers.”<sup>275</sup> The re-invention of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple was similarly creative—but it had unanticipated results: the memorialized “temple of the mind” took on very different parameters for different groups of Jews, leading to what Akenson and others<sup>276</sup> have called one of the central paradoxes of Jewish and Christian history: the likelihood that Judaism as we know it today (i.e., normative Judaism, based on post-Second Temple rabbinic teaching) is younger than its Christian counterpart. Akenson explains: “Christianity was much quicker in using the pieces of the old Judahist religion to invent a temple-religion-without-a-temple than were the founders of what became known as the Jewish faith. That the Christian construct is older than the Jewish [i.e., rabbinic] one is so deeply counter-intuitive that we are apt to deny it strenuously and thus to miss the rich irony of the historical process, and the stunning originality of each group as it struggled to re-invent itself and hence to survive.”<sup>277, 278</sup>

<sup>273</sup> Biale 1986, 47, summarizing bBaba Metzia 59b.

<sup>274</sup> Akenson 1998, 212.

<sup>275</sup> Akenson 1998, 212.

<sup>276</sup> E.g., Boyarin 1999. See the discussion of Boyarin’s ideas below.

<sup>277</sup> Akenson 1998, 212. This observation is echoed by Daniel Boyarin in *Dying for God* (1999), which uses a rabbinic interpretation of the biblical Esau to suggest that even the rabbis themselves had entertained this possible interpretation of the relationship between the “new” (i.e., rabbinic) Judaism and an emerging Christianity. In rabbinic literature, Boyarin reminds us, Esau (and his descendant, Edom) is Rome, and thus, inevitably, Christianity: “In some ways and fashions, the midrashic equation of Esau with Rome ... gave rise to a paradox .... While Jews and Christians both have thought of something called Judaism as the elder religion and something called Christianity as the younger, the midrashic implications of [reading Esau as Rome] are that Christianity is the elder and

Ultimately, Akenson's historical model emphasizes discontinuity, while traditional historical models, highlighting the great age of the Jewish faith and characterizing Christianity as its (much) younger sibling, tend to emphasize the continuity of the Jewish tradition. The continuity model, too, has merit, and we can find archaeological and historical evidence in support of it. For example, William G. Dever (2006) provides a comprehensive summary of the findings from archaeological excavations in Israel over the past several decades. Some of these findings would seem to support the continuity of Jewish observance over time rather than its "reinvention" after the destruction of the Second Temple.<sup>279</sup> James Parkes (1974) points to the essential continuity between pre- and post-Temple worship, evidenced by the very ease of the transition between pre-Temple Judaism and post-Temple Christianity. For Parkes, the foundations of the Church were laid by Jews who *had already moved in a direction* that anticipated the emphasis in Christianity on morals and ethics rather than on observance of the letter of the law: "Had the synagogues of the diaspora insisted primarily on the ritual and not the moral and ethical implications of Judaism, on observance of the letter rather than the spirit of the Law, it is doubtful if this transition would ever have taken place except in a few

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Judaism the younger. This would suggest that rabbinic Judaism [i.e., Jacob, later Israel] was born on the heels, indeed, holding the heel, of its elder brother, the Church" (5).

<sup>278</sup> Arguably, Akenson's presentation suffers a significant flaw. Akenson attempts to discredit the traditional view of Judaism (as older than Christianity) by suggesting that traditionalists are simply unwilling to see the "truth" of the relationship between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. He dismisses would-be critics out of hand, implying that their criticism is not worthy of his response. The technique does not serve to make Akenson's argument stronger, nor does it prove the weakness of the traditional perspective. Rather, Akenson's approach serves to raise the reader's suspicion: *Why* does Akenson not address the traditional argument more directly? What is he afraid of? Even Akenson's use of "Judahist" rather than "Jewish" to refer to pre-rabbinic Judaism and Jewish culture—a usage that he defends in his introductory chapters—could be read as serving primarily to discredit the traditional view that Judaism is older than Christianity (i.e., "it wasn't even *Judaism* then"), without Akenson's having to support his claim or refute other scholarship.

<sup>279</sup> See, for example, his analysis of animal bone evidence in Iron I villages: "One animal species is conspicuously absent in our Iron I villages: the pig. Although not nearly as common as sheep and goats at Bronze Age sites, pigs are well attested then. They are also common at Iron I coastal sites that are known to be Philistine. But recent statistical analyses of animal bones retrieved from our Iron I Israelite sites show that big bones typically constitute only a fraction of 1% or are entirely absent. A number of scholars who are otherwise skeptical about determining ethnic identity from material culture remains in this case acknowledge the obvious: that here we seem to have at least one ethnic trait of later biblical Israel that can safely be projected back to its earliest days" (108). See also Boster, Hudson, and Gaulin (1998), who discuss recent research by Karl Skorecki *et al.* on genetic markers in the Jewish tribes of Cohen and Levi, perhaps the strongest evidence to date for Jewish ethnic continuity across time and distance.

individual cases. What Christianity offered them was not something completely different, but the same thing with, in addition, the power of Jesus Christ in place of the disadvantages of circumcision and other ritual prescriptions."<sup>280</sup>

Thus, while the revisionist model proposed by Akenson and others—suggesting that rabbinic Judaism is younger than Christianity rather than older—is temptingly fresh and provocative, we must be cautious about how far to push the familial analogy. Rather than presuming *either* a clear parent-child relationship between Judaism and Christianity *or* a sibling relationship between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, with Christianity as the (slightly) elder twin, it is more in keeping with the historical evidence to view both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism as stemming from an older form of Temple Judaism and as having had profound doctrinal and theological influence on each other, given the social and political tensions—internal and external to the Temple—at the time.<sup>281, 282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Parkes 1974, 24-25.

<sup>281</sup> See also Neusner (1987, x-xi) and Boyarin (1995, 17), who cites James Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 135: “[In the first century] Jews had to be on their guard against what were or were seen to be repeated threats to their national and religious rights. Whenever such a threat was perceived their reaction was immediate and vigorous .... The infant Christian sect was not exempt from this unrest. Indeed we generalize a fairly firm conclusion from the above review of evidence: wherever this new Jewish sect’s belief or practice was perceived to be a threat to Jewish institutions and traditions its members would almost certainly come under pressure from their fellow Jews to remain loyal to their unique Jewish heritage’ .... I believe that the same pressures also explain, *mutatis mutandis*, much of the development in the literature of the Rabbis in the second and following centuries, when Christianity becomes more and more the source of the threat to ‘Jewish institutions and traditions.’”

Seth Schwartz (2001) makes a similar observation in his examination of the influence of imperialism on Jewish religious and cultural history: “attempts to make sense of the remains of ancient Judaism must consider the effects of shifting types of imperial domination .... The Jewish cultural explosion of late antiquity which can be read from a revival of literary production and the emergence and diffusion of a distinctively Jewish art and archaeology, is in complex ways a response to the gradual christianization of the Roman Empire” (291).

<sup>282</sup> Arguably, the current politics in the academic world regarding the relationship between early rabbinic Judaism and an emerging Christianity is similar in many ways to the post-destruction Temple politics of turn-of-the-millennium Jerusalem: numerous competing opinions and agendas, and significant support for each of the major players. It is worth keeping in mind here Schwartz’s (2001) dry observation about the nature of historical research: “[I]n order to begin interpreting some small body of material (indeed, even to decide what constitutes an appropriate body of material to study), we must make all sorts of quite specific assumptions about its historical antecedents, context, and effects” (291). In all historical research, our interpretive models determine to a large extent how we read particular archaeological and historical evidence.

*Talmud and social context: the rabbinic academy*

[W]hen we actually read the [Talmud], we find it picayune and nit-picking, full of dry debates on matters of no practical consequence. When we respond in that way, we face the kind of writing that these sages intentionally set forth: God lives in the details, so we have to learn to think about the details—but to think in accord with large and encompassing principles.

– Neusner 1994, 154

In the rabbinic academies of the fifth and sixth centuries, the Talmud took on its final shape. Today the text is not only the most comprehensive legal document to survive from the ancient world but it is also one of the primary foundations of modern normative Judaism. Unfortunately, sketching out the social environment of the Talmud is not simply a matter of assembling pertinent details from the text. And recognizing possible subtexts of the Talmud is not simply a matter of circumscribing the “rabbinic academy” and its Babylonian setting and then using this “key” to unlock subtextual meaning. What we call the “rabbinic academy” developed over several hundred years in various geographical locations, with cultural differences that may suggest the social environment inhabited by a particular academy but which also may change over time.<sup>283</sup> We cannot, therefore, assume that the Talmud directly reflects either the environment of the rabbinic editors or the environment of the historical sages. Rather, we should view the Talmud as a repository of several centuries of rabbinic culture—not wholly historical, practical, philosophical or rhetorical, but a combination of all of these; a vast compendium of rabbinic perspectives, philosophies, anecdotes, opinions and laws, many of which are derived directly from Scripture or interpretations of Scripture, but also many of which are more difficult to relate directly to Scriptural passages. The text is “authorless” in that all the texts are presented as dialogical “anthologies of quotations and discussions, *as if* we had access to the actual raw material of rabbinic oral interactions.”<sup>284</sup> Many of the Talmud’s aphorisms, opinions and experiences are attributed to particular sages, but most contemporary scholars agree that the historicity of these attributions

<sup>283</sup> As the New Historicists remind us, we must also remember that any observer of the historical rabbinic academy—whether an historical observer or a modern one—is not objective; her observations are shaped by her own social environment and are also susceptible to change over time.

<sup>284</sup> Boyarin 1985, 26. Emphasis in original.

is suspect.<sup>285</sup> One cannot be sure, for example, that a particular statement attributed to Eliezer was not actually made by someone else. Yet recent scholarship has gone some way toward illuminating the dynamic environment of the Babylonian rabbinic academies and those who populated them, and one of the primary tools used in this task is the close literary comparison of the Babylonian Talmud and its earlier counterpart, the Palestinian Talmud. The differences between the two suggest features unique to Babylonian rabbinic culture, and it is in considering these differences that we can begin to construct an ethnography of the later text.

The Babylonian Talmud has two distinct layers—what Rubenstein (2003) calls “literary strata”: statements attributed to the sages, or Amora'im, and unattributed or anonymous material, called *stam* (meaning “no one” in Hebrew). Jeffrey Rubenstein (2003) argues that the culture of the Babylonian Talmud is primarily a product of the Stammaim, the anonymous contributors of the *stam*,<sup>286</sup> who lived between 450 and 650 CE. The attributed portions of the Babylonian Talmud are similar in style to the attributed portions in the Palestinian Talmud. The majority of the differences between the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds are in the *stam hatalmud*, which generally provides analysis and context for the Amoraic statements. And it is in these contributions of the Stammaim (which in the Babylonian Talmud comprise about one-half of the text<sup>287</sup>) that we see most of the stylistic and dialectical elements noted below.

Stammaitic culture is shaped by the development of the academy, a social organization that did not exist previously in a similar form. While earlier sages studied in small disciple groups with an individual rabbi, these groups were generally isolated and were not part of a larger educational system as were the permanent rabbinic academies of the fifth and sixth centuries, which would set the stage for the great rabbinic schools of the Middle Ages. Rubenstein allows that the Talmud is not a “transparent reflection” of the academic life but that it both “[expresses] and [helps] create the wider set of ideas and patterns of behavior that

<sup>285</sup> See Neusner 1994; Boyarin 1985, 1999.

<sup>286</sup> See Halivni 1986 and the discussion above.

<sup>287</sup> As a comparison, the anonymous material in the Palestinian Talmud amounts to approximately one-tenth of the whole. See Rubenstein 2003, 6-7.

constitute culture.” The organization of the Talmud also serves as a window onto the rabbinic world: “since the Bavli is largely dialogical in structure, presenting opinions and arguing them back and forth, significant cultural tensions are rarely suppressed. They tend to be exaggerated, as two opposing sides contest issues as if conducting a heated debate.”<sup>288</sup> According to Rubenstein, the rabbinic academy was a tense and often hostile environment, where honour, dialectical ability and the avoidance of shame were the keys to success. Competition between the rabbis was fierce, one’s social status and standing within the academy directly dependent on one’s ability to out-debate others.<sup>289</sup> A scholar would aim to unseat his opponent by outwitting him with sharp logical analysis of the talmudic material, while at the same time defending his own argument from similar challenges.<sup>290</sup> A scholar would lose face if seen to be purposely shaming a colleague, and being shamed by another was both socially and professionally damaging.

Rubenstein (2003) argues that the Babylonian rabbis “refracted” the older Palestinian and Babylonian narratives “through the prism of their experience” and that, in the process, some changes “occurred unintentionally or subconsciously as transmitters replaced outmoded ideas with those more familiar to them,” while other changes were the result of conscious, deliberate editing. Rubenstein offers the following explanation:

We must keep in mind that aggadic [narrative] traditions carried much less authority than halakhic [religio-legal] dicta. The Stammaim were reluctant to meddle with the legal statements of the Amoraim but had less compunction about “modifying” exegetical or narrative elements .... To retell stories of earlier sages, casting them in their own image and reworking the plots,

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<sup>288</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 12-13.

<sup>289</sup> Rubenstein points out that military imagery is used often: “sages battle for their opinions to prevail, attack opposing claims, and defend their rulings from verbal assaults” (20).

<sup>290</sup> Rubenstein inserts an interesting discussion of the rabbinic passion for *pilpul* (roughly, analytical skill) and its importance to dialectical argument: “Although literally meaning “turn from side to side,” hence “search, examine, investigate,” *pilpul* was derived by the Bavli from “pepper” (*pilpel*) and refers to intellectual sharpness and acumen. The term seems to apply to a range of activity, including reasoning, interpretation and discussion, and need not always refer to sharpness in dialectics per se. But in general sense *pilpul* relates to the same concern for intellectual virtuosity that underlies dialectical ability. R. Hanina boasts, ‘Were the Torah, God forbid, to be forgotten in Israel, I would restore it by means of my dialectical arguments [*pilpuli*].’ [bKet 103b, bBM 85b] He cannot mean that he would simply remember Torah, or he would say so explicitly. Rather, he seems to mean that from his knowledge of argumentation and his ability to reason he can reconstruct the original Torah” (Rubenstein 2003, 48).

provided the Stammaim a means to express themselves while preserving the veneer of anonymity. In all these ways stories and homiletical traditions absorbed elements of Stammaitic culture. By carefully attending to these traditions and the difference from Palestinian sources, we catch glimpses of the culture of the Stammaim.<sup>291</sup>

By analyzing the *stam hatalmud*, among other things, scholars have made several suggestions regarding the nature of Babylonian rabbinic life: In the Babylonian rabbinic academy, greater emphasis was placed on dialectic process than on problem solving; daily rabbinic interactions were distinctly oral-traditional in character; partnership study was highly valued; shame was a pervasive and motivating factor; and collective authority held greater weight than individual authority, yet deliberate care was taken in the Talmud to retain plurality and dissent, particularly the preservation of the minority opinion.

The Babylonian Talmud is less interested in arriving at solutions to interpretive problems than it is in exploring the dialectic process itself. Arguments frequently seem contrived in order to satisfy style or structure requirements rather than to contribute new material to the discussion or to arrive at any certain conclusion. Rubenstein (2003) suggests that “spurious questions” and “forced answers” act more as “literary devices to emphasize aspects of the debate” rather than as valid discussions of points of law.<sup>292</sup> Neusner (1994) argues that it “is not that the *Bavli*’s framers are uninterested in conclusions and outcome. It is that for the second Talmud [i.e., the Babylonian Talmud], the deep structure of reason is the goal, and the only way to penetrate into how things are at their foundations is to investigate how conflicting positions rest on principles to be exposed and juxtaposed, balanced, and, if possible, negotiated, or if necessary, left in the balance.”<sup>293</sup> Ultimately, “[t]he real difference between the Talmuds emerges from ... the *Bavli*’s completely different theory of what it wishes to investigate.”<sup>294</sup> Frequently, the rabbis seem much more comfortable leaving things “in the balance”: “in the course of a talmudic discussion, an argument that threatens to resolve a controversy is considered a

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<sup>291</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 6-7.

<sup>292</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 3.

<sup>293</sup> Neusner 1994, 203.

<sup>294</sup> Neusner 1994, 204.

difficulty [*kushia*], while one that restores the controversy itself is called a solution [*terutz*]!”<sup>295</sup>

Interactions in the Babylonian rabbinic academy were essentially oral in character and fiercely competitive.<sup>296</sup> Debates were conducted aloud in front of a learned audience, and emphasis was placed on a rabbi’s skill in immediate response—which demanded that he retrieve from his memory the talmudic and Scriptural passages that supported his argument. A scholar did not generally have the opportunity to go away and formulate an argument on his own, and while it is clear that the rabbinic scholar could read, there is no evidence in the Talmud or other texts to suggest that writing—or, indeed, even reading—was a regular part of rabbinic daily life. Instead, all rabbinic scholars were expected to have committed to memory the oral traditions of their masters. The rabbis in the Talmud never consult written records of earlier material. In the academy, when there was doubt about the wording of a particular passage, a special group of highly skilled “repeaters” (the Tannaim) would be called in to recite the oral text from memory.<sup>297</sup> Possibly rabbinic scholars used their own written notes for personal study, but these would have had no authority and were not used during debates. Text was not only expensive and time-consuming to produce; it was also generally suspect as the product of a single individual rather than the

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<sup>295</sup> Boyarin 1985, 27.

<sup>296</sup> Citing Ong’s (1982) observations of the essentially “agonist” nature of oral societies, Rubenstein (2003) suggests that the hostile environment of the rabbinic academy is due in part to its emphasis on oral dialectic and debate: “Oral and predominantly oral cultures typically evince a more violent tenor than cultures in which writing is the dominant mode of expression. Literate cultures often conduct social and interpersonal dealings through exchanges of texts. Writing mediates the interaction and attenuates the immediacy of the experience. In oral cultures, however, social intercourse is always face-to-face. Combative and hostile interactions will therefore be experienced more acutely in oral than literate cultures” (62). For a discussion of the relationship between violence and oral culture, see Ong 1982, 43-46:

Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human life world, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.

... [V]iolence in oral art forms is also connected with the structure of orality itself.

When all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound, interpersonal relations are kept high—both attractions and, even more, antagonisms.

<sup>297</sup> See Mandel 2000, 76, and Rubenstein 2003, 62.

collective rabbinate. Memory rather than writing was ultimately seen as the more flexible and reliable study tool.<sup>298</sup>

Another key feature of the Babylonian rabbinic academy, and the Babylonian Talmud, is the emphasis on partnership study.<sup>299</sup> Though scholars competed with each other, they were also dependent on one another: Torah study was not to be conducted in isolation. Two scholars working together were less likely to forget important oral-traditional passages than one scholar working alone, and the immediate competition likely encouraged a more intense form of study. But ultimately, Rubenstein argues, partnerships were encouraged because the rabbis understood that “study with a partner increases intellectual ability. By debating back and forth, two scholars ‘sharpen’ (*mehadedin*) each other’s minds. The conception of learning depicted here is that of sages arguing with one another so as to improve their analytical skill, not that of a master repeating traditions before his students who commit them to memory.”<sup>300</sup> These partnerships complicated academy life: Rabbinic scholars “depended on study-partners for rigorous argumentation but simultaneously risked insulting their partners in the heat of the debate. A razor’s edge seems to have separated intense argumentation—the prerequisite for rabbinic life—from verbal insults that could cause embarrassment and (social and metaphoric) death.”<sup>301</sup>

Shame and the avoidance of shame are, as noted above, powerful undercurrents in the Babylonian Talmud and in rabbinic life. The desire to win a dialectic argument while at the same time not be seen to shame one’s opponent in the process, and the twin desire to not be seen to lose a dialectic argument nor be shamed by another scholar whilst doing so, are frequent talmudic themes. Status in the academy “depended, to some extent, on not being shamed. It is not simply that a sage would feel like a fool or lose self-esteem for not knowing the answer, but that he might

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<sup>298</sup> See Rubenstein 2003, 62. Elman also points to “the overwhelming likelihood that [the] legal material [of the Babylonian Talmud] (about two-thirds of the total) was orally transmitted, and that the analytical and dialectical redactional layer, perhaps 55% of the Babylonian Talmud ... was also orally composed. This long period of oral transmission and composition took place against a backdrop of what I shall term ‘pervasive orality’ in Babylonia, as contrasted with the greater prevalence of written transmission in the Greco-Roman cultural sphere” (Elman 1999, 52, 53).

<sup>299</sup> An emphasis that is not apparent in the earlier Palestinian Talmud (Rubenstein 2003, 53).

<sup>300</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 52.

<sup>301</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 59.

either officially be demoted or lose his unofficial rank in the eyes of his colleagues.”<sup>302</sup> A rabbi made a name for himself by presenting and defending clever, logical and inventive interpretations of oral law,

[gaining] great respect and a higher position within the academic hierarchy by raising unimpeachable objections against his disputant’s claims while successfully parrying objections against his own opinions. This verbal sparring sometimes takes an unfortunate turn from healthy, competitive debate to insults and hostility, which can make the academy feel like a violent arena. A sage’s constant fear is that he will be unable to answer attacks on his position and suffer public humiliation. This is a grave danger, for the sages experience shame as a type of social death, and the failure to perform may also jeopardize their positions within the hierarchy. Yet, inasmuch as the victim suffers from being shamed, so the perpetrator risks divine punishment for shaming a fellow sage. To achieve academic success is therefore an extremely delicate task.<sup>303</sup>

In the Babylonian Talmud, and in the rabbinic academy, it is not the individual sage who wields authoritative power but, rather, the collectivity of sages—the “community of Rabbis”<sup>304</sup>—that debates *halakhic* matters and decides on an interpretive direction. The preservation in the Talmud of dissenting or non-normative opinions<sup>305</sup> seems to imply their importance for future study and discussion as part of the collective rabbinic teaching, but ultimately, the authority of the collective remains primary. Even a rabbi who has a dissenting opinion may advise following the direction indicated by the collective majority, despite the fact that the oral torah’s preservation of his singular view grants it a certain merit. For example, in the *Mishnah*, tractate Eduyyot 5:7, a sage known for his opposition to the consensus of sages defers to the majority on his deathbed:

In the hour of his death, [Aqavya b. Mehalelel] said to his son: My son, retract four teachings I used to offer.

He replied: Why didn’t you retract them [earlier] yourself?

He replied: I heard from the mouth of the majority and they [my opponents] heard from the mouth of the majority. I insisted on what I heard and they insisted on what they heard. But you have heard from an individual

<sup>302</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 76.

<sup>303</sup> Rubenstein 2003, 2.

<sup>304</sup> Boyarin 1985, 27.

<sup>305</sup> For example, the teachings of the unconventional Ben Avuya, who was dubbed *Aher* (“The Other”) by his colleagues.

and from the multitude. It is best to leave the teachings of an individual and to hold fast to the teachings of the multitude.<sup>306</sup>

In this case, the student who has heard two opinions—that of an individual sage and that of a collective of sages—is instructed not to deliberate on the two equally but to discard automatically the former in favour of the latter. The nature and content of the opinion are not at issue. Nor is the student's preference for one teaching over another. Rather, the authoritative version of a teaching is the version that is supported by the sages *as a group*. In the case of this narrative, so much power does the collective of sages have in the transmission of the oral torah that even a sage who in life frequently opposed the majority advises his son to follow the lead of the collective. Note that the dying sage does not indicate his opinion has changed—and, indeed, the passage seems to imply that it has not—he simply retracts his teachings. Martin Jaffee suggests that an emphasis on the importance of collective opinion may reflect the rabbinic literature's oral-traditional beginnings. When there is no written text against which to verify the accuracy of an oral tradition, an individual rabbi acting alone might, knowingly or unknowingly, mislead his students or pass on an inaccurate rendering of a particular teaching. Reliance on collective memory alleviates this pressure: “[in] the absence of a written textual record, it was the consensus of collective memory that defined the authentic contour of the transmitted tradition.”<sup>307</sup>

The “collective authority” modeled in the Babylonian Talmud is not simply the authority of the majority or the authority of the consensus. It is also the authority to determine and model the *process of discussion*; in this process, the importance of the collective is paramount. Yet the collective authority of the rabbis was in large part shaped by its character of *non-consensus*. In its preservation of a variety of opinions and interpretations, the Talmud arguably canonizes dissent: “From a transcendental standpoint, this theory of authority is paradoxical because it is seen to hang on the heteroglossia of dialogue, on speaking with many voices, rather than on the logical principle of univocity, or speaking with one mind.” Where “single-mindedness

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<sup>306</sup> Translated in Jaffee 2001, 68.

<sup>307</sup> Jaffee 2001, 68.

produces factionalism,” the tolerance of many voices arguably minimizes the opportunity for schism.<sup>308</sup>

Finally, although both Talmuds address similar points of law, have a nominally similar structure and follow similar formats, the Babylonian Talmud devotes more time to the exploration of minority opinions than the earlier Palestinian Talmud—despite the fact that it openly emphasizes the authority of the collective. Arguably, what we have preserved in Babylonian text, in addition to discussions of Jewish law and anecdotal histories of the rabbis, is a particular mode of discourse—a blueprint, if you will, of rabbinic dialectic. Key to this blueprint is the retention of plurality and dissent. Even when an individual argument is generally agreed to be incorrect (or voted so by a majority), it is still preserved for future generations. These dissenting voices continue to inform future discourse (a fact that could not have been lost on the sages who first compiled and edited the Talmud, as the historical rabbinic figures quoted within the Talmud frequently cite contradictory historical arguments themselves). This retention of plurality and dissent affects the shape of the text, its interpretation and the environment in which it is interpreted in several ways. Not only is a range of arguments preserved for posterity but so, too, is the process of inquiry. Despite the fact that a matter has been decided a particular way, the dissenting voice continues to inform and influence all later discussion. In addition, arguments that are not resolved are retained in their unresolved state, suggesting, perhaps, that the rabbis viewed the inquiry as ongoing, and that matters need not necessarily be fully resolved to be of value. The Talmud acknowledges—invites, in fact—the possibility that a dissenting voice may have an inherent value in its capacity to guide or inform, despite the fact (or, perhaps, *because of* the fact) that it presents an alternative point of view—the implication being that there may be a time and place in the future for new understanding of old arguments.

In this study I argue that this unique dialectic blueprint also enabled the rabbis to preserve and transmit a particular political and social philosophy—of both accommodation and resistance to authority. The rabbis were able to preserve and

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<sup>308</sup> Boyarin 1985, 27, citing Gerald Bruns, “The Hermeneutics of Midrash,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz, 189-213 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 199.

transmit this “hidden transcript”—of accommodation and resistance within the rabbinic texts for several reasons: The text was in a language that its oppressors either did not know or did not know well; the nature of the message is partly embedded within the structural framework of the text and is therefore not wholly discernible to one who studies only the *content* of the text; and the content of the text itself is layered with meanings in addition to its denotative meaning and, therefore, one’s understanding of this content depends on one’s having studied (and perhaps memorized) other parts of the rabbinic text and on one’s being familiar with contemporary social and cultural symbols within the context of the Babylonian rabbinic environment.

It is with this insight into the social context of the Talmud and the culture of the rabbinic academy that we turn now to seek out the hidden political transcripts beneath the surface of the text itself.

### **Hidden transcripts in Avodah Zarah**

In *Dying for God* (1999), Daniel Boyarin explores the role of martyrdom in Judaism and Christianity in the rabbinic era, using James C. Scott’s model of the hidden transcript to shed light on the talmudic and patristic literature. His suspicious reading of the texts reveals an ambivalent and exceedingly complex dialogue about the spiritual validity of “dying for God,” both among the rabbi subjects of the Babylonian Talmud and between the rabbinic literature and the patristic literature.<sup>309</sup> In their discussion of martyrdom the rabbis of the Talmud seek to define themselves in relation to, and as separate from, the early Christians: “through the medium of the legend, the Rabbis are teaching us something of the complexities of their world and their worldview ... They are, we might say, both recognizing and denying at one and the same time that Christians are us, marking out the virtual identity between

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<sup>309</sup> There is no obvious dialogue on martyrdom between the rabbinic literature and the patristic literature, and there is not always such a dialogue among the rabbis whose words the Talmud purports to represent (and Boyarin himself does not suggest there is). Rather, set alongside each other, the texts arguably “respond” to contemporary social and political tensions—and, subsequently, to each other—in an indirect way, with the discourse of martyrdom being one aspect of this response.

themselves and the Christians in their world at the same time that they are very actively seeking to establish difference."<sup>310</sup>

Boyarin contends that the upheaval following the destruction of the Second Temple shaped to a significant degree the development of what would eventually become rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. But Boyarin rejects the theory that each religious movement developed on its own trajectory, arguing instead that the frequently hostile and antagonistic dialogue between the two gave each system its unique form, and that we can see evidence of this dialogue in the talmudic and patristic literature. The forcefulness with which the rabbinic and Christian traditions distanced themselves from each other in the early centuries of the new millennium cannot wholly be explained by the inherent differences between rabbinic and Christian doctrine. Of all the "Judaisms" extant at the Second Temple's destruction, Pharisaic Judaism and "Christian Judaism" were in many ways quite similar—certainly, in some respects, much more similar to each other than either one was to the Judaism practised by the Sadducees. Boyarin argues that while Christianity and Judaism appeared to be fairly similar "on the ground," and those who practiced one faith or the other believed similar things,<sup>311</sup> the religious authorities consciously emphasized the differences between the two for particular purposes. In the politically charged environment of post-Second Temple Judaism, one's identity determined the sort of treatment one could expect to receive, and "denials of sameness [in the rabbinic and patristic texts] are precisely what we would expect in situations of difficult difference."<sup>312</sup> Boyarin uses the words of Ignatius to illustrate his point: "'It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism,' thunders Ignatius, thus making both points at once, the drive of the nascent orthodoxy to separation and the lack thereof 'on the ground.'"<sup>313</sup> The tendency to emphasize distance and dissimilarity still shapes modern scholarship, in which "[t]here has been a kind of general collusion between Jewish and Christian scholars (as earlier between the Rabbis and the Doctors of the Church) to insist on this total lack of

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<sup>310</sup> Boyarin 1999, 32.

<sup>311</sup> Both Pharisaic (later, rabbinic) Judaism and Christian Judaism (later, Christianity) were two of many Judaisms common in the first few centuries CE. *Cf.* Schwartz 2001.

<sup>312</sup> Boyarin 1999, 11.

<sup>313</sup> Boyarin 1999, 11.

contact and interaction, each group for its own reasons.” Here Boyarin enlists the observations of Philip Alexander in support: “The attempt [to lay down a norm for Judaism in the first century] barely conceals apologetic motives—in the case of Christianity a desire to prove that Christianity transcended or transformed Judaism, in the case of Jews a desire to suggest that Christianity was an alien form of Judaism which deviated from the true path.”<sup>314</sup>

In *Dying for God*, Boyarin proposes that, instead of the *Stammbaum* or family tree-like model of Judaism and Christianity, in which Christianity “grows out of” Judaism (or in which both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism “grow out of” an older form of Judaism), we should consider a “wave theory” of Christian and Jewish history. In this model (one adopted from the field of linguistics), similarities between Christianity and Judaism are due to convergence rather than a “family relationship.” New developments and ideas are passed from one group to another because the groups are in close contact with each other and experience similar cultural, political and social circumstances. The wave model works on “the assumption that an innovation takes place at a certain location and then spreads like a wave from that site to others, almost in the fashion of a stone thrown into a pond. In this model, convergence is as possible as divergence.”<sup>315</sup>

In early Christian and Jewish literature, argues Boyarin, different understandings of authority and the interpretation of God’s will contributed to competing discourses on martyrdom. Particularly, the form of rabbinic textuality shaped Jewish concepts of God and obedience to God. While in the patristic literature, “dissenting voices gradually were either eliminated or homogenized,” resulting in the “single-authored” “text of the Church,” the “carnavalesque Talmud” went out of its way to preserve dissenting opinions, and “the chorus of heterogeneity (certainly on [martyrdom], as on many questions) [is] loud and cacophonous.” This feature lends itself to a general cultural tolerance of discord in the rabbinic tradition: “the very fact that both options remain enshrined in the same text with the same consequent authority produces a

<sup>314</sup> Boyarin 1999, 7, citing Philip S. Alexander, “‘The Parting of the Ways’ from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in James D.G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135*, 1-25, The Second Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism, Durham, September 1989 (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991): 3.

<sup>315</sup> Boyarin 1999, 9.

religio-cultural situation in which schism can be avoided while nearly opposing ideological opinions both remain active.”<sup>316</sup> In the words of another author, “The great achievement of Rabbinic Judaism is ... that it created a framework which tolerated, even encouraged disputes, but did not create sects.”<sup>317</sup> In the Talmud, when the sages debate a point of law, the argument is not necessarily resolved by consensus or by majority vote—in fact, frequently it is not resolved at all. This suggests that “for the Rabbis, the destination can remain open,”<sup>318</sup> and, as I argue above, that the “end result” is not as important as the dialectic process itself.

The Talmud, then, reflects a cultural environment in which debate, scepticism and disagreement are not only tolerated but presented as necessary elements of scholarly discourse. Preserving the dissenting opinion, and presenting it alongside more generally accepted opinions, bestows a certain value on the dissenting opinion, as fundamental to the interpretation of one’s surroundings. It also suggests an environment in which the goal is discussion rather than resolution. One could argue that discussion *is* the rabbinical resolution to problems, and that the preservation of ancient rabbinic discourse enables even the sages of old to take an active part in contemporary discourse.

#### *Hidden transcripts and the martyr narratives*

In his search for hidden transcripts of resistance in the Talmud, Boyarin focuses on three martyr narratives—two in which the protagonist uses deception and wit to escape a martyr’s fate, and one in which the protagonist seems to welcome the opportunity to die “for God.” In the section that follows, I lay out the three martyr narratives and Boyarin’s reading of them as elements of a hidden rabbinic transcript. Boyarin himself does not consider how text is used specifically to disguise subversive political sentiment; rather, he investigates the act of martyrdom and the discussion surrounding martyrdom to tease out evidence for Scott’s model. My analysis preserves Boyarin’s connections and sets the stage for what I identify in the

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<sup>316</sup> Boyarin 1999, 65.

<sup>317</sup> Boyarin 1999, 66, citing Shaye J.D. Cohen (1980, 3), “A Virgin Defiled: Some Rabbinic and Christian Views on the Origins of Heresy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1): 1-11.

<sup>318</sup> Boyarin 1999, 66.

final section of this chapter as the three principles for the textual disguise of political or social subversion.

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Elazar embody Scott's hidden-transcript "trickster": they use duplicitous language and action to transmit disguised meaning and avoid angering the Romans. By engaging in word and logic play, the two rabbis satisfy members of the dominant group that they are "innocent" (of the charges of sectarianism) and at the same time satisfy their followers that they are "guilty" (of worshipping a Jewish God and teaching Torah). The dominant group understands one meaning by their words and actions; the rabbinic audience understands quite a different meaning by the same words and actions. The third rabbinic figure, Rabbi Hanina, openly defies domination and invites retribution by the dominant. He uses no trickster language to avoid his fate; his open defiance of the Romans and his declaration of obedience to God are honest—even, arguably, honourable. On the surface, Rabbi Hanina's declaration that he "occupies" himself with Torah because "thus God has commanded me!" is comparable to the Christian martyr's defiant "Christianus sum!" But when the Hanina narrative is read in conjunction with other talmudic passages, including those of Eliezer and Elazar, its meaning is not clear. First, by his words, Hanina not only dooms himself but also condemns his wife to execution and his daughter to a life of prostitution. Second, the account of his sentencing follows immediately upon the account of Elazar's witty escape from the same fate, and thus by comparison seems even harsher. Third, the Talmud itself refers to the fate of Hanina as a punishment, not as an honourable event. Fourth, there is some suggestion in the Talmud that the fate of the Jews as a subjugated race is God's will, and that to teach Torah in public in flagrant disobedience of the law of the land is as much an affront to God as it is to the Romans. Arguably, while the narrative of Rabbi Hanina *itself* presents little opportunity for hidden transcript in the form of tricksterism, as a single thread in the tapestry of the Talmud it has a different meaning—one that is not possible to read, discuss or understand unless one is familiar with the textual environment (that is, the surrounding "environs" of the text itself—what comes before and after the Hanina narrative) and its ethnography (that is, the role it might play within the wider rabbinic culture). It is possible that Hanina

represents the Jewish equivalent of a Christian martyr (he does, after all, display the fortitude and honesty attributed to Christian martyrs of the time); at the same time, however, it is also possible that Hanina serves as a warning to those who live and operate in an environment in which the trickster is venerated and tales of cunning and intellect are preserved and interpreted for generations.

a) *The narrative of Rabbi Eliezer*

Scott argues that it is in the best interests of both the dominating force and the subjugated population to be seen to take part—if not willingly, then with a minimum of fuss—in the public discourse of hegemony, especially during those times when the line between dominant and subordinate populations is very starkly drawn. But as Scott points out, such an arrangement inevitably encourages subterfuge and duplicity, as members of the subordinate population express insubordination in subtle and secretive ways so as not to attract unwanted attention from the dominant group. Thus, seemingly innocent participation in the public transcript may actually represent instances of the hidden transcript cleverly disguised so as to be recognizable only to the subordinate's peers: "what may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends."<sup>319</sup> Boyarin agrees: it follows that "what might appear as accommodation to the culture of the dominating population might be, in fact, the very opposite."<sup>320</sup> I would add that in times of near total domination, the public discourse of hegemony offers the ideal cloak for the hidden transcript: by openly accusing a subordinate of injecting politically subversive messages into the publicly accepted transcript of hegemony, the dominant representative admits openly his insecurity about the completeness of his dominance and the legitimacy of his rule. If the subordinate then denies any subversion or wrongdoing, the dominant's position is further undermined (that is, his doubts have been shown to be unfounded and he now seems paranoid and perhaps not fit to rule). The subordinate, on the other hand, is now free to continue to

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<sup>319</sup> Scott 1990, 48-49.

<sup>320</sup> Boyarin 1999, 45.

transmit subversive messages in this veiled manner, with less chance of being openly accused of doing so: the dominant representative will be wary of portraying himself and his force as weak or anxious. The success of the subordinate's subversion encourages others to take part, and the dominant order's foundations are further shaken.

The Talmud, argues Boyarin, "gives us direct access to the 'hidden transcript,' frequently thematizing the doubleness of its own trickster language." Because the Talmud was composed and taught in a language that was unfamiliar to the conquerors,<sup>321</sup> it "provided a safe and private space within which to elaborate the transcript hidden away from the colonizer."<sup>322</sup> In tractate Avodah Zarah, Rabbi Eliezer uses a double entendre to avoid execution on charges of sectarianism. His word play is clear to his Jewish audience (presumably those individuals present at the time, as well as the later, Babylonian rabbinic audience) but is missed by the Romans in attendance. The Talmud's "trickster language" enables it to relate both what the Roman *hegemon* understood Rabbi Eliezer to have meant by his cryptic answer to the charges and what Rabbi Eliezer actually meant, without significant danger to itself or to those who study its content.

When Rabbi Eliezer was arrested [by the Romans] for sectarianism, they took him up to the place of judgment [*gradus*]. The judge [*hegemon*] said to him: "An elder such as you, has dealing with these foolish things?!" He [Eliezer] said: "I have trust in the J/judge." The judge thought that he was speaking about him, but he was speaking about his Father in heaven. He [the judge] said: "Since you have declared your faith in me, you are free [*dimus = dismissus*]."<sup>323</sup>

By employing the rabbinic understanding of God as divine Judge of man's actions, Eliezer effectively tells his fellow Jews that the Roman *hegemon's* judgement is of no consequence to him; at the same time, however, he leads the Roman *hegemon* to understand that he will abide by the *hegemon's* decision, whatever it may be. While this double entendre is spelled out in the Talmud, it is not written in a language that

<sup>321</sup> Much of the Talmud was composed under Roman rule; during the period of the rabbinic academy in Babylonia, the Sasanians were in power.

<sup>322</sup> Boyarin 1999, 46.

<sup>323</sup> The translation of the Eliezer narrative here and below is used in Boyarin 1997.

the Roman (or, for that matter, Sasanian) overlords were likely to know, and Eliezer's duplicity remains fairly hidden.

I would put forward another possibility: The fact that Rabbi Eliezer does not say "I have trust in God the Judge" but instead leaves his statement ambiguous suggests that in fact he does *not* completely trust either God the Judge or the Roman *hegemon* to deliver him from his predicament. His odds of survival are highest if he comes up with an answer that conceivably might appease both judges. This interpretation would be in keeping with Biale's (1986) observations about the political shift in rabbinic Babylonia away from God as the Divine Orchestrator of earthly events and toward a theory of rabbinic power, in which the rabbis transformed both the role of God and the role of the rabbi in human affairs. Using this interpretation, Eliezer's words arguably mean, "I have trust that both God and the *hegemon* are limited in their power to order the affairs of men; ultimately, I have more power to shape the outcome of these events than they do."<sup>324</sup>

Eliezer's recognition of his own autonomy, despite the fact that he finds himself in what is arguably an archetypal position of subjugation, does not alleviate his personal sense of guilt, however: All things happen for a reason—and, according to Biale's "rabbinic theory of power," a *human* reason rather than a divine one. Eliezer believes that he must be in some way responsible for his arrest and the accusations levied against him. How could he have brought this on himself? The narrative continues:

When he came to his house, his disciples came to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. Rabbi Akiva said to him: "Allow me to say to you one of the things that you have taught me" [an honorific euphemism for the student teaching the teacher]. He [Eliezer] said to him "Say!" He [Akiva] said to him: "Rabbi, perhaps you heard some matter of sectarianism, and it gave you pleasure, and because of that you were arrested for sectarianism." He said: "By heaven, you have reminded me. Once I was walking in the upper market of Sephorris, and one of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene,<sup>325</sup> a man by the

<sup>324</sup> Boyarin also questions whether Eliezer trusts either judge, but to slightly different effect. See the section on the narratives of Rabbis Elazar and Hanina below.

<sup>325</sup> Boyarin adds this commentary regarding the reference to Jesus in this passage of the Talmud: "The references to Jesus, found in both manuscripts [i.e., the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds], are deleted in the printed editions, as have nearly all such references since the first editions, owing to the Italian Jewish censors. In this way, the hidden transcript, which had threatened to become public owing to the wide distribution of printed Talmuds and increasing knowledge of its language and text

name of Jacob of Kefar Sekania, met up with me. He said to me, 'It is written in your Torah: 'Do not bring the wages of a prostitute or the proceeds of a dog [to the house of your Lord]'' (Deut. 23:19). What about using them to build a latrine for the High Priest?' And I said nothing to him. And he told me that thus had taught Jesus his teacher: "'It was gathered from the wages of a prostitute, and to the wages of a prostitute it will return [Micah 1:7],'' it comes from a place of filth, and to a place of filth it will return' [i.e., for building a latrine one may use the proceeds of a prostitute], and the matter gave me pleasure, and for that I was arrested for sectarianism, since I had violated that which is written: Keep her ways far away from you!" [Proverbs 5:8]

It is Eliezer's delight in the cleverness of the sectarian solution, then, rather than any belief in sectarian practice that leads to his arrest. He has violated the rabbinic edict to "keep her ways far away from you"—not simply the ways of the prostitute, but anything that bespeaks of Christian doctrine or belief. In this passage, sectarianism (or, rather, Christianity) is likened to the prostitute: an attractive but ultimately unacceptable option for the rabbinic Jew. The dialogue illustrates well the earlier argument of "simultaneous rabbinic attraction to and repulsion from Christianity"<sup>326</sup> "on the ground" in the rabbinic era. Even a revered sage such as Eliezer is not wholly immune to its charms.

If we acknowledge Eliezer's weakness for Christian interpretations, then another element of the scene with the *hegemon* becomes clearer. An individual accused of being a Christian in the Roman Empire could perform one of two acts to prove his innocence: he could perform a sacrifice to the emperor or he could curse Jesus.<sup>327</sup> While sacrificing to the emperor was not something an observant Jew could do, presumably Eliezer had no reason not to curse Jesus if he truly disdained Christian teaching and wished to follow the direction to "keep her ways far away from you!" The truth, suggests Boyarin, will be to some "highly unsettling": *Rabbi Eliezer did not want to curse Jesus*. The rabbi would no more welcome the opportunity to curse Jesus to "prove" his innocence than he would the opportunity to sacrifice to the emperor. Argues Boyarin: "Rabbi Eli'ezer, the text implies, had more than some

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by learned Christians (especially converts), was rendered hidden again, interestingly enough this time from most Jews as well" (1997, n35).

<sup>326</sup> Boyarin 1999, 27.

<sup>327</sup> See Pliny the Younger's Letter to Trajan (in *Letters and Panegyricus*, 2: 402-3) and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, in which the proconsul offers Polycarp the opportunity to "take the oath ...; revile Christ" and he will be released (Schoedel 1967, 65).

sympathy for Jesus and his followers and their Torah.”<sup>328</sup> I would argue that in this passage we can see reflected one of the hidden transcripts of a certain segment of the rabbinic population, that is, the profound influence of sectarian/Christian interpretation on the thinking of some rabbinic figures. This transcript is disguised and embedded in a passage of the Talmud that, on the surface, seems to profess aversion to the very perspective it serves to disguise. The underlying current of Christian sympathy can be discerned by those who wish or know to look for it but can be disregarded or ignored by those who prefer to deny the attraction of Christianity or who wish to define rabbinic tradition as wholly separate from the rise of Christian theology.

Finally, Boyarin highlights one other hidden transcript that underscores Rabbi Eliezer’s possible “unrabbinic” leanings, a “bit of trickster language or indirection ... that is not directed at the *hegemon*, but at the readers of the text.” The phrase translated here by Boyarin as “arrested for sectarianism” could easily be understood as “arrested *by* sectarianism”<sup>329</sup>—that is, intellectually or spiritually transfixed by Christianity. Writes Boyarin:

The [rabbinic] tradition itself remembers that Rabbi Eli’ezer ... was declared a heretic by the Rabbis for a period of his life. If indeed, there is a sort of repressed motive here of this central rabbinic figure’s attraction to Christianity, then the point that I am making against drawing strict lines between the histories of what only *much* later became defined as separate religions is considerably strengthened. In inscribing Rabbi Eli’ezer—one of the most canonical and central of rabbinic culture heroes—in a fictive plot situation that would lead him to extreme marginality and then, in the end, recuperating him, the biographical narrative is inscribing, I suggest, the under-construction, the being-invented nature of the divide between Christians and Rabbis in the third century.<sup>330</sup>

If Boyarin is correct, one of the hidden transcripts embedded within the Talmud ironically points to a close relationship between the rabbis and the early Christian teachers—quite different from the divergence emphasized in later patristic and rabbinic histories.

<sup>328</sup> Boyarin 1999, 28.

<sup>329</sup> Many prepositional prefixes in Hebrew have multiple meanings: for example, *b’* can mean *in*, *by*, *with* and *at*; *l’* can mean *to*, *toward* and *into*.

<sup>330</sup> Boyarin 1999, 29.

b) *The narratives of Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Hanina*

Rabbi Elazar, like Rabbi Eliezer, uses trickery to avoid martyrdom at the hands of the Romans. Rabbi Hanina, on the other hand, goes to his death publicly defying Roman authority. When they are read in conjunction with one another, the narratives suggest several possible subtextual meanings that differ from the meanings suggested when the narratives are read separately. Consequently, the political program of the rabbis can be interpreted variously, according to which hidden transcript one's reading reveals.

Both Elazar and Hanina are arrested at more or less the same time on charges of sectarianism, and they commiserate with each other:

Our Rabbis have taught: When Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata and Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon were arrested for sectarianism, Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata said to Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon: 'Happy art thou who has been arrested for only one thing. Woe unto me who has been arrested for five things.' Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon said to him: 'Happy art thou who has been arrested for five things and will be rescued. Woe unto me who has been arrested for one thing and will not be saved, for you busied yourself with Torah and with good deeds, while I only busied myself with Torah.' This is in accord with the view of Rav Huna who said that anyone who busies himself with Torah alone is as if he had no God ...<sup>331</sup>

When he is called before the judge, Rabbi Elazar proceeds to prove Rabbi Hanina right: a combination of wit, trickery and "miraculous" happenstance sees Elazar dismissed.<sup>332</sup>

They brought Rabbi Elazar the son of Perata. They asked him: 'Why did you teach and why did you steal?' He answered them: 'If book, no sword and if sword, no book! Since one must be absent, the other must as well.' 'Why do they call you Rabbi [Master]?' He answered them: 'I am the master of the weavers.' They brought before him two spools of thread and asked him: 'Which is the warp and which is the woof?' A miracle took place for him. A male bee came and sat on the woof and a female bee came and sat on the warp. 'And why did you not come to the House of Abidan [the local Pagan Temple]?' He said: 'I am old, and I was afraid that you would trample me with your feet.' They said to him: 'Up until now how many old men have been

<sup>331</sup> bAvodah Zarah 17b, translation by Boyarin (1999, 52).

<sup>332</sup> The text does not actually tell us that Elazar is dismissed. In juxtaposition to the story of Rabbi Hanina that follows immediately afterwards, however, it is clear that Elazar does not suffer the same fate as his colleague. Translation by Boyarin (1999, 52-55).

trampled?' A miracle took place for him, and that very day an old man was trampled.

'Why did you release your slave to freedom?' 'It never happened!'

One got up to testify against him [that he had released his slave]. Elijah came and appeared like one of them. He [the disguised Elijah] said to him [the potential witness]: 'Since a miracle has happened for him in the other cases, a miracle will happen this time as well, and something bad will happen to you [lit. that man].'<sup>333</sup> That man [who was betraying him] did not pay attention and got up to tell them. A letter had been written to the House of Caesar. They sent it with him [the informer]. He [Elijah] threw him four hundred parasangs, so that he went and never came back.

First, Rabbi Elazar waves away the charges, pointing out that they contain a self-contradiction and that, therefore, neither charge is valid: "If book, no sword and if sword, no book!" This logic, Boyarin reminds us, "makes sense in terms of contemporaneous [Hellenistic] cultural norms" and is also illustrative of a certain type of talmudic reasoning: "when a statement includes two propositions that are mutually exclusive, they are both considered to be untrue." At the same time, it enables the Talmud to impart a subsurface message about the relationship between the Romans and the Jews—namely, that the Romans are the ones with the swords (and are therefore rogues and not scholars). The Jews, on the other hand, have Torah, and (thus) do not wield the sword and (thus) cannot be thieves.<sup>334</sup> Rabbi Elazar then lies about his role as a rabbi, lies about his reasons for not appearing at the pagan altar and possibly lies about his treatment of his slave. In all cases, "miraculous divine intervention [signals] the text's approval of his tactics."<sup>335</sup>

Hapless Hanina, on the other hand, in the passage that immediately follows, is honest and defiant, proclaiming loudly his devotion to God in the face of certain death—and is rewarded with his own execution and that of his wife, and an unsavoury sentence for his daughter:

They brought Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon, and said to him: 'Why did you engage in Torah?' He said to them: 'For thus the Lord my God has commanded me!'

<sup>333</sup> From Boyarin's notes: "In talmudic style, detrimental predicates are nearly always put into third-person sentences in order to avoid predicating them of the speaker or his interlocutors in a situation in which the text was read out loud. So "that man" frequently has to be translated as 'I' or as 'you'" (1999, 167, n46).

<sup>334</sup> Boyarin 1999, 53.

<sup>335</sup> Boyarin 1999, 54.

They immediately sentenced him to burning, and his wife to execution [by the sword], and his daughter to sit in a prostitute's booth.<sup>336</sup>

What can we learn about rabbinic political philosophy from this juxtaposition? On one hand, it could be argued that God himself approves of Elazar's deceptive tactics (if we allow that "miraculous divine intervention" is a sign of God's approval), for He allows Elazar to live to worship Him another day; Hanina's forthrightness, on the other hand, elicits no such benevolent response on the part of the divine Judge. One might suggest from this reading that it is better to be a live Jew than a dead martyr, and that "any sort of deception is legitimate, as long as it gets you off the hook with the oppressor, because his rule is absolutely illegitimate."<sup>337</sup> It is also possible to read Hanina's actions as ultimately selfish: his pride not only determines his own execution but also condemns two others to a horrible fate.

On the other hand, as Boyarin points out, the Hanina passage "is a paradigmatic martyr story: Martyrdom is witness to the greater jurisdiction of God's power and justice, which supersedes that of the mere temporal authority. 'For thus the Lord my God has commanded me!'"<sup>338</sup> If we read Hanina's narrative this way, then it serves to undermine the Elazar passage: Hanina defies the Romans and upholds the commandment to study Torah, accepting his fate with stout-hearted conviction, all the while refusing to denounce his faith or his God. By comparison, Elazar is sly, evasive and dishonourable, wriggling out of his predicament with bluster and half-truths, arguably refuting the will of God both through his words (he denies he is a rabbi, for example) and his actions (for unlike Hanina, who allows no threat of martyrdom to dull his defiance, Elazar fights the charges against him in order to save his own skin).

Boyarin encourages an even deeper reading. If we return to the story of Rabbi Eliezer and his need to seek an explanation for his predicament within the realm of his own actions, we find evidence to suggest that "the Rabbis, like Job's friends, cannot stand the thought of a God who punishes without cause."<sup>339</sup> According to this

<sup>336</sup> Translation by Boyarin (1999, 56).

<sup>337</sup> Boyarin 1999, 55.

<sup>338</sup> Boyarin 1999, 56.

<sup>339</sup> Boyarin 1999, 52.

line of reasoning, one must have done *something* to warrant being tried or punished. In rabbinic literature, it is not unusual to read the Roman Empire as a symbolic representation of God's anger at the Jews' idolatry, doubt and various other infidelities. But "[t]he notion, not by itself remarkable, that the oppressive Empire is God's whip, raises the question of resistance to a high theological pitch."<sup>340</sup> Clearly Elazar resists "divine will" by using his wits to evade martyrdom and deny his role as a rabbinic leader. But Hanina, too, resists "divine will," as is made clear in the talmudic passage that follows, an alternative version of Rabbi Hanina's activities and arrest:

Our [ancient] Rabbis have taught: When Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma became ill, Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradyon went to visit him. He said to him: "Hanina, my brother, don't you know that this nation was set to rule over us by Heaven, and it has destroyed His house, and burned His temple, and killed his saints, and destroyed his goodly things, and still it exists, and I have heard that you gather crowds together in public, with a Scroll of the Torah in your lap, and you sit and teach!" He [Hanina] said to him, "From Heaven they will have mercy." He [Yose] said to him, "I say logical things to you, and you answer me: 'From Heaven they will have mercy!' I will be surprised if they do not burn you and the Scroll of the Torah with you."<sup>341</sup>

They said: there did not pass many days until Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma died and all of the great of Rome went to bury him. On their way back, they found him [Rabbi Hanina] sitting and studying Torah and gathering congregations in public with the Scroll of the Torah placed in his lap. They wrapped him in the Scroll of the Torah and surrounded him with sticks of firewood and lit them and they brought wool swatches, soaked in water, and placed them on his heart, in order that he did not die quickly.<sup>342</sup>

By daring to study and teach Torah in public—a prohibition placed on the Jews by the Romans, who (as "God's whip," according to this reading) are divinely charged with the task of setting limits on the Jews, Hanina defies God Himself. This defiance cannot go unpunished, and thus Hanina's "martyrdom" can be read not as selfless self-sacrifice in the name of faith but rather as divine justice for the rabbi's flagrant disregard for God's laws. Boyarin summarizes:

At first glance, then, and given the predilections of our own culture toward "manly" *virtus* and *honestas*, predilections that are themselves a product of a

<sup>340</sup> Boyarin 1999, 52.

<sup>341</sup> Translation by Boyarin (1999, 57).

<sup>342</sup> bAvodah Zarah 17b-18a, translation by Boyarin (1999, 58).

Romanized Christianity, we might very well understand that Rabbi Hanina's story is being presented as a hermeneutical key to reading the stories of both Rabbi Eli'ezer and the farce of El'azar the son of Perata, and the latter two come off badly.

The text, however, immediately disables such a reading in the sequel, actually an alternative version of the story of Rabbi Hanina's arrest: .... Rabbi Hanina, according to this version, not only bravely answered "Because my Lord has commanded me" when questioned by the Romans, he actively provoked his arrest by provocatively gathering groups to study Torah in public....

.... the Romans never forbade the exercise of the Jewish religion per se, but only of particular practices that they considered offensive (such as circumcision) or politically dangerous. Teaching Torah in public as a site of potential sedition certainly would have been one of them, as would also another of Rabbi Hanina's practices, the pronouncing of God's name in public, which the Romans would see as *maleficium*. At the same time, there is more than a hint here, in the voice of Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma, at a quietist theological position exactly antithetical to that of a martyr. It is God who has sent the Romans to rule over the Jews, and the rebellious act of provocatively gathering crowds to study Torah in public is thus rebellion against God's will.<sup>343</sup>

The interpretive richness of these three narratives serves to underscore their suitability as a veil for the hidden transcript of the Babylonian rabbinic population. Torah and Talmud study provided the Babylonian Jews with the "autonomous social sites" in which subversive discourse could be generated.<sup>344</sup> The language of the Talmud (and Torah itself) was essentially unfamiliar if not wholly foreign to the dominant ruling force, whether that force was Roman or Sasanian or other, and the complex interpretive possibilities of Talmud can be fully realised only when Talmud is understood as a whole, not simply as isolated passages. Rabbinic students and Torah scholars would have understood each passage in the context of others, and in the context of layered interpretations,<sup>345</sup> as well as in the context of contemporary social discourse. That the Talmud served as an agent of rabbinic political discourse is perhaps best supported by the Roman attempts "to prohibit the study of Torah, and in particular to prohibit it in crowds," which would seem to "indicate their

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<sup>343</sup> Boyarin 1999, 56-59.

<sup>344</sup> Scott 1990.

<sup>345</sup> Generally of far greater complexity than the ones we have examined above. We have considered only a few passages in this study; readings become more complex when more comparisons are made to other talmudic episodes.

understanding ... of the role of such gatherings in the maintenance of the hidden transcript."<sup>346</sup>

### **The three principles of disguise**

A review of the martyr narratives in *Avodah Zarah* suggests that subtextual meaning may be disguised in the Talmud using methods that exploit the relationship between the written text and the oral-traditional culture of the rabbinic world. I categorize these methods according to three principles. First, word play in the Eliezer narrative suggests two very different political meanings—one meaning satisfies the Roman *hegemon* and secures Rabbi Eliezer's release from custody, while the other meaning indicates to the rabbi's followers that he rejects the *hegemon's* authority and instead places his trust in God. Another possible interpretation of the same passage is that the rabbi's use of double entendre indicates not only his essential distrust of both the Roman *hegemon* and God when it comes to determining a fair and appropriate fate for human beings but also his faith in his own wits to determine a favourable outcome. This interpretation would fit with David Biale's (1986) reading of the Talmud as the political document of a group of people who no longer see God as having divine authority over earthly events. Concealment through diction and syntax (including the use of double entendre, word play, and multiple, "extratextual" meanings layered onto a fixed text) serves to illustrate what I will call *articulation*, the first principle of textual disguise.<sup>347</sup> Using this principle, one or more politically subversive meanings can be hidden "in full view" of the dominant group, enabling a subjugated population to exchange information that may not have been widely acceptable in a relatively open forum.

Second, the structure of the text itself presents opportunities to disguise politically subversive meaning. Using the principle of *construction*, a discrete passage has one potential meaning when it is read or heard in isolation from other passages or texts but suggests another (often quite different) meaning when it is read

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<sup>346</sup> Boyarin 1999, 57-58.

<sup>347</sup> In this case, a disguise rendered even more effective because the language of the Talmud would not have been familiar to the dominant population.

or understood in conjunction with other episodes or as an element of the textual structure as a whole (as in the case of the narratives of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Elazar above). This structural obfuscation enables users of the text to discuss the text openly, knowing that outsiders will not understand the whole because they do not have access to other portions of the text—which, in the case of the Talmud, have been memorized by the rabbinic scholars and thus serve as an ever-present interpretive environment. A scholar who knows the whole Talmud by heart understands the meaning of a particular episode within this larger structural framework; those who do not know the Talmud in this way (Jews and non-Jews alike) are not likely to have this insight and are not likely to engage fully in the sort of interpretive dialectic that such a perspective enables.

Third, in the martyr narratives of Avodah Zarah, much time and space is devoted to detail: how the prisoners respond publicly to the accusations made against them, the personal conversations they engage in with each other and with their colleagues, and, in Hanina's case, the grisly details of his death. Elsewhere in the Talmud, there is extensive discussion of ostensibly finicky details of *halakha*, or religious law. From these examples, one could understand a primary meaning of the martyr episodes to be the historical and narrative details of the rabbis' arrests, or in the case of *halakhic* discussions, the resolution of minutiae. But in the Talmud these details operate according to the third principle of disguise: the *diversion*, or deliberate misdirection away from subversive meaning by focusing audience attention on other elements of the text. By seeming to focus on detail, the Talmud can give the impression to an uninformed audience that its primary meaning is in these details.

Key to the text of the Talmud, however, is the *manner* in which its content is presented, specifically, its preservation of conflicting opinions. In the case of *halakha*, many questions are not resolved; where a matter *is* resolved, dissenting opinion is frequently preserved. In the case of the martyr narratives, it is ultimately not clear whether the preferred response to Roman dominance is defiance or duplicity—and, indeed, it is possible to find support for both interpretations if we consider the three narratives within the context of the first two principles of disguise outlined above. I suggest that one of the primary meanings of the Talmud, not fully

appreciated by the Roman or Babylonian imperialists or the later Christian Church, is the preservation of dissent in the Talmud in order to foster critical thinking within a systematic framework, equipping the intellect to refute dominant ideology and imperial argumentation in a clandestine (and “unactionable”) manner, all the while avoiding factionalism within the Jewish community. Essentially, suggests the Talmud, Jews may have different opinions, but they are all ultimately on the same side—that is, *not* the side of the oppressor. If we consider the Talmud in light of the principle of diversion, we can argue that the text actually serves as a blueprint for political-resistance preparation, conducted under the noses of the dominating group, beneath the seemingly innocent patina of the ever-constant quibbling in the rabbinic academies.

In the chapters that follow I examine two other texts produced within highly oral-cultural environments in light of these three principles of disguise, namely: 1) articulation, or the veiling of resistance with diction and syntax, 2) construction, or the cloaking of subversive meaning in textual structure, and 3) diversion, or the obfuscation of subversion by focusing audience attention elsewhere—much like the magician’s sleight of hand. I look for evidence to suggest that these principles are expressed in the comparison texts (and, if so, to what degree) and the likelihood that they contribute to the concealment of politically or socially subversive transcripts from a dominant or oppressive group. I consider, too, how the type of text might shape the expression of these principles, and how the role and intention of the author might influence the presentation of politically subversive ideas. I also reflect on whether there may be other principles of textual disguise evidenced in the comparison texts that are not immediately visible in the talmudic literature. I will then propose how such comparisons help further our understanding of the function of texts in oral-traditional and “oral-literate” environments, and how they shape our understanding of power relationships.

Chapter 2  
**Weaving Resistance in Homer's *Odyssey***

Like the Fates, they weave and determine destinies, not for others,  
 but for themselves.

– Kruger 2001, 137

I think all critics put too much emphasis on Penelope's constant weeping. Odysseus, Menelaus and Telemachus weep frequently also, but weeping prevents none of them, or Penelope, from acting wherever possible.

– Foley 1978, 23n9

Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse  
 is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter.

– Heilbrun 1988, 18

In the previous chapter, I outlined three principles of disguise discernible in the talmudic literature that serve to veil subsurface or “metatextual” politically and socially subversive meaning. In this chapter, I consider how well these three principles of disguise might be applied in an exploration of veiled or hidden transcripts of social resistance in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The New Historicist and ethnographic models I use in this study<sup>348</sup> are premised on the understanding that both the Talmud and the *Odyssey* are suggestive of, *in some ways*, the environments in which they were produced.<sup>349</sup> We cannot presume that either the Talmud or the *Odyssey* mirror their cultural contexts exactly: they are both ultimately highly stylized, purposeful creations of their authors. Yet when we consider the pieces within the context of their cultural environment, it is possible to see reflections of this environment within the literary text. The tenor of rabbinic debates in the Babylonian Talmud, for example, indicates a focus on fiercely competitive dialectics, honour achieved through dialectic ability and logical analysis, and the avoidance of intellectual shame—all of which seem to indicate an

<sup>348</sup> See the discussions above.

<sup>349</sup> As opposed to, for example, the environments that each purports to represent.

evolution of the Babylonian rabbinic academies out of the earlier rabbinic communities of the Palestinian Talmud. We might expect to find similar correspondences between Homer's Greece and the literary "world" described in the *Odyssey*. While we cannot presume that events and characters in the *Odyssey* are exactly like events and characters that Homer experienced, we should perhaps assume that the events and characters in the poem will suggest cultural values, settings and social systems that are understandable and credible to Homer's audience.

I hypothesize in this study that a meaningful comparison of some of the processes involved in the creation of such diverse cultural products is possible. However, it is nonetheless the differences between the *Odyssey* and the Talmud rather than any likely points of comparison that are most obviously and immediately apparent. These differences should be acknowledged at the outset, if only so that we are aware of the limits of any comparisons we make. Homer's *Odyssey* hardly presents as the ancient Greek equivalent of the Talmud. Where the Talmud is a compendium of legal arguments and anecdotal illustrations, the *Odyssey* is an epic poem, the historical yet presumably fictionalized account of events following the Trojan War. Homer's *Odyssey* is highly structured poetry; the Talmud is written in prose, albeit often pithy and memorable, aphoristic prose. The *Odyssey* was likely performed in front of an audience, at least in part for the purposes of entertainment; the Talmud was likely recited "in performance" only when clarification was necessary, and even then, never in its entirety. Though some parts of the Talmud are certainly entertaining, it would be difficult to argue that the intended purpose of the Talmud was to entertain. The Talmud is primarily a warehouse of legal arguments, rules and narrative illustrations—a collection of disparate elements, often without a clear and logical order. The *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is a cohesive narrative whole with complex characters and an extended plot. It may function as a "warehouse" of cultural information in addition to relating the return of Odysseus to Ithaka,<sup>350</sup> but if

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<sup>350</sup> See Eric Havelock (1982, 1986), who calls the Greek epic a memory storage "warehouse" in the context of Greek oral poetry.

so, then this function is not billed as the poet's primary purpose. Structurally and materially, then, the two texts follow vastly different programs.

Despite these differences, however, we can also note at the outset similarities between the two texts. First, they are both essentially "oral" texts—that is, most scholars agree that they were composed within a primarily oral-traditional environment and recorded in writing sometime after they were composed. It is also generally agreed that the earliest versions of the texts were used or performed—and therefore received by the audience—in oral-traditional environments where texts and literacy were still exceedingly rare. Scholars agree that while both the Talmud and the *Odyssey* have been edited significantly as literary texts since they were first recorded in written form, they both retain oral-traditional characteristics and can be understood best if we view them as oral rather than wholly literate texts.<sup>351</sup> Second, both texts are presented as records of historical events and people. The characters are proffered as representations of real people experiencing representations of real historical events. We may understand these people and events to be fictionalized representations of the real thing, and perhaps contemporary audiences did as well, but they are not presented as fictions *per se*. They are not, in other words, "made up" in the same way that today we understand a novel or short story to be made up. Rather, they are understood to be the authors' or narrator's interpretation—or, indeed, their orally transmitted "memories"—of history.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Various scholars have catalogued "characteristics" of oral-traditional literature in the cultures of both ancient Greece and the biblical and rabbinic worlds. See particularly Lord (1960), Foley (1999), Thomas (1992), Havelock (1982, 1986) and Kirk 1976 for oral tradition in Greece; Culley (1967), Elman (1999), Elman and Gershoni (2000), Gerhardsson (1998 [1961]), (Jaffee 2001) and Niditch (1996) for oral characteristics in the biblical and rabbinic traditions. The *Odyssey* and the Talmud both display highly formulaic construction, for example, in terms of both phraseology and textual structure.

<sup>352</sup> This point brings up the issue of what the ancients considered to be the nature of "truth" (commonly *aletheia* in Greek, although this word itself does not appear in the *Odyssey*). Historical accuracy as we understand it today is not the same as what the Greeks understood to be historical "truth." An historically accurate account of the past may not necessarily contain what an author or audience feels to be the underlying "truths" about events or people. In an oral-traditional context, where an account of history amounts to what is remembered and transmitted orally, the details that survive are likely those details that remain culturally relevant to the contemporary audience. The concept of accuracy as we understand it is of little importance, not least because it becomes increasingly difficult to judge the relative merits of two differing oral renditions of the same event. Herodotus contends frequently that while he is aware of several oral variations of the same event, he records the version most likely to be the "true" one, based on his own judgment of the information. Yet he often includes the "untrue" versions as well, frequently in far more descriptively lurid detail

Before we can attempt a meaningful comparison of the two texts as cultural reflections, however, we must determine *how* each text is suggestive of its environment. In the previous chapter we sketched out an ethnography of the Talmud in order to ascertain how it might indicate the parameters of a rabbinic culture. I then outlined what I called the “three principles of disguise,” each principle serving to underscore a very particular relationship between the cultural environment and how political or social resistance might be embedded within the text, discernible only if we read the document open to this sort of interpretation.<sup>353</sup> Similarly, before we can determine whether and how the *Odyssey* might express these three principles of disguise (or how it might suggest the existence of other principles), we must create an ethnography of the Homeric epic. What aspects of archaic Greece does Homer’s *Odyssey* suggest? How did this epic function in the oral-traditional environment in which it was composed, recorded and received? What was Homer trying to say, and

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than the “true” version. The reader is left to wonder *why* Herodotus includes such detailed descriptions of untrue events. I would argue, as others have done, that these untrue accounts include some important version of *aletheia* that the so-called “accurate” record lacks. See, for example, Herodotus’ three differing accounts of Xerxes’ return to Asia and the “Persian Captain’s Reward” in Book 8 (117-20) of *The Histories*. On the relationship of *aletheia* to memory and history, Stewart Flory (1987), Gill and Wiseman (1993) and Shrimpton (1997) are helpful.

Also of interest are Goody and Wilks (1968) and Shrimpton (2006). In the former, the writers recorded an orally transmitted aetiological narrative about the kingdom of Gonja in northern Ghana. The Gonja that Goody and Wilks visited in the 1960s had five tribes. According to the inhabitants, upon the death of the old king, Gonja was divided equally among the king’s five sons. The authors compare this narrative to one recorded by an observer of the same people sixty years previously. In that version, *seven* tribes were descended from the king’s *seven* sons. In the intervening sixty years, administrative circumstances had led to the “disappearance” of two of the seven tribes. Goody and Wilks concluded that the oral narrative had been modified to take into account this turn of events. In essence, the Gonjan people “remembered” the tale that was most relevant, or most meaningfully “truthful.” In his (2006) paper “Oh, Those Rational Athenians!” Gordon Shrimpton considers the extant accounts of the Athenian civil war. Over a relatively short time period, written accounts of the war became significantly less bloody. Shrimpton suggests that the Athenians’ self-concept as a civilised and civilising force in the Greek world contributed to this modification of their historical account: as one cannot be both bloody *and* civilised, the remembered “truth” of the civil war had to change.

<sup>353</sup> A likely criticism of this approach is that we can interpret almost anything into a text if we read it particularly looking for “evidence” of our interpretation. While this is undoubtedly true to some extent, there are interpretations for which we find more, and more convincing, “evidence” than others, a fact which must bear some weight in our conclusions. A feeling of resistance to domination is a common human condition in various cultures, across various times; it would be less surprising to me to find evidence of resistance to domination in an ancient text than, for example, a veiled desire amongst a population to be subjugated or abused by a dominant group (unless the expression of such a desire served some other advantageous purpose—such as, perhaps, helping to conceal a widespread feeling of resistance).

why did he say it like this?<sup>354</sup> More importantly for the purposes of interpretation, how was his audience likely to understand his presentation? Once we have a clearer picture of the cultural environment of the *Odyssey* (and the extent to which this environment is indicated by the poem), we can begin to determine possible relationships between text and social context and the relevancy of the three principles of disguise for a study of subversion or concealed resistance.

As we did in our ethnography of the Talmud, we should acknowledge at the outset the limitations of such an exercise with respect to the *Odyssey*: We cannot expect to construct a comprehensive and accurate model of Homer's Greece based on a single epic poem that ostensibly recounts a series of events that occurred several centuries prior to the poem's final form, even though, as Mireaux (1959) points out, the *Odyssey* is far likelier to reflect Homer's environment than that of the Trojan War and its epic heroes.<sup>355</sup> For though Homer records a fictionalized version

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<sup>354</sup> Recent scholarship on the textualization of oral epics (Honko 2001) and the role of the "mental text" in the preservation and transmission of oral traditions has reinvigorated discussions about the identity of Homer. Was Homer an oral poet or simply the recorder of an oral-traditional poem? Was Homer one individual, or does the *Odyssey* represent the work of many generations of oral poets, whose performances are fragmentary representations of a "pre-textual frame," what Honko calls the "organized structure of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer's mind," much of which is "linguistically pre-processed by way of expressions and sequences which are easy to activate in performance" (23). If the latter is the case, then arguably any resistance we find encoded in the *Odyssey* is not the product of a single poet but, rather, of an entire oral-traditional culture—generations of oral poets performing for audiences that inevitably include the next generation of oral poets, all of whom carry with them a more-or-less common "mental text," of which the story of Penelope and Odysseus forms a part. It is difficult to create an ethnography of the Talmud without considering the identity and social situation of its rabbinic authors; in the case of the *Odyssey*, we must create an ethnography for a poem whose author (or authors) and social situation are, in various ways, even less accessible. Yet the possibility that resistance might be encoded over generations of poets—who may or may not be aware of the hidden resistance they are preserving and transmitting—also serves to refocus the task: we are creating an ethnography of *the Odyssey*, not an ethnography for a poet named Homer. The resistance veiled by the text is not likely that of Homer himself, whoever he (or they) may be; rather, Homer observes the resistance of others, and cloaks this resistance within the framework of an epic poem that on the surface celebrates the tenacity and bravery of its hero and the fidelity of his wife. When we move towards an ethnography of the *Odyssey*, we must ask ourselves, What does the environment of the *poem* tell us about the actions of its inhabitants? In other words, given the (poetic) environment she inhabits, what might Penelope's actions tell us about her view of the world and her capacity to shape events? Within this framework, comparisons between the world of the *Odyssey* and modern-day rural Greece, for example, are not meant to be strictly analogous but, rather, to extend and broaden our naturally limited ethnography of a fictionalized tale with observations and examples from real human experience.

<sup>355</sup> Whatever the epic poems may suggest about the distant heroic past, "we must nevertheless admit that the world [the poets] described was the one which lay before their eyes .... Let us then take care not to eliminate from the Homeric narratives and descriptions certain features supposedly too 'modern,' under the pretence that these are out of keeping with an archaism that is deliberate and on

of historical events, ultimately he creates a performance piece designed to entertain. He uses a narrative framework that conforms to the entertainment expectations of his audience; to some extent the actions and dialogue of his characters are constrained by this framework and help to support it.<sup>356</sup> Though Mireaux's assessment is provocative, we must also keep in mind that Homer wishes to "tell a story" and fashions characters in order to do so. Thus, Penelope, Odysseus, Telemachus and the suitors are not individuals who act on their own as might a resident of Homer's Greece. Ultimately, they are tools of the poet: they all serve particular narratological purposes. While they may represent aspects of the world in which Homer composes and performs, their roles are circumscribed by the poet and the poetic environment as much as by the cultural setting.

While recognizing that Penelope and the other *Odyssey* characters are tools of Homer might seem initially to negate or at least diminish any suggestion of real life we see in the *Odyssey* (for if the *Odyssey* is a poetic creation of the poet, how can we trust its representation of real people, events or systems at all?), we must keep in mind that "poetic narrative" is simply the framework in which the poet has chosen to operate. The fact that he chooses to use a poetic narrative to present his understanding of people and events does not necessarily make his observations any less trustworthy a representation of real-world truths.<sup>357</sup> By way of comparison, simply because the authors of the Talmud have chosen to present their understanding of people and events within the framework of "oral law" does not make their reflections on human nature and events any more or less accurate or "truthful." We

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the whole very superficial. When the bards speak of ivory keys, lamps, candelabra and a few other more or less luxurious accessories, we should consider that this is because they had seen them in the already luxurious dwellings of the nobles and princes of their time" (Mireaux 1959, 16). Cf. Kirk (1976), who discusses in detail the debate regarding the relative accuracy of the poems in terms of their representation of the late Achaean Age as opposed to their depiction of Homeric Greece (8-18). Kirk remarks on the "historical ambiguity" of Homer's poetry: "[I]ittle of the extraordinary cult-ridden and accountancy-dominated society of the [Mycenaean Linear B] tablets is conveyed in the relaxed and informal palace scenes of the *Odyssey*. .... the absence from the *Odyssey* of elaborate divine offerings and of a highly organized scribal system for the central control of commodities (and the absence from the tablets of divination and singers) is symptomatic of the poem's historical ambiguity. Either it includes many elements and values derived from a later age, or it has distorted the original Mycenaean material through later misunderstanding, or both" (9).

<sup>356</sup> As Walter Donlan (1994) suggests, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* present a "sociological milieu within a fairy tale" (46).

<sup>357</sup> See the footnote above on "accuracy" and "truth" in ancient oral-traditional environments.

can extend this analogy further and suggest that simply because a historian chooses to present his understanding of past events within the framework of “historiography” need not make his observations any more or less accurate a representation of environmental or historical truths, either. Ultimately, how an author presents his understanding of events and people is shaped by the framework he chooses to present it in, but the degree to which his presentation reflects “truth” is variable and not wholly dependent on the framework he chooses to use. Rather, the author’s representation of events and people depends more on his interpretation of those events and people in light of his own understanding of the sort of complex social relationships that inform decision-making, values and belief systems, and personal interactions—and this interpretation is shaped in turn by his own experiences and environment.

At the same time, Homer presents a deliberately crafted story: this deliberateness suggests that Homer’s characters voice on some level Homer’s thoughts about the world he observes. While Penelope might not tell us directly anything about how she resists patriarchal authority, arguably Homer tells us how a woman might manipulate circumstances to carve out a bit of autonomy for herself and to influence the outcome of events within a patriarchal system. It is this perspective that informs my reading of the *Odyssey* and the manner in which the text may serve to mask resistance to social domination or to restrictions imposed by a rigid social or political framework. Thus, this study rests on the assumption that a population experiencing oppression will empower itself to resist oppression in whichever way it can, even given the limitations placed upon it by the dominating culture. This assumption is shaped by recent feminist interpretations in literary criticism that “validate ... contemporary feminist notions”<sup>358</sup> that all subjugated populations, regardless of their social and political circumstances, will find a way to exercise some measure of power—however limited this power might seem to us—over their lives. A reading of Penelope in which Homer gives her a “rather stronger and more cunning role in the plot of Odysseus’ homecoming than is often attributed to her,” depends on our reading the poem “in the light of modern feminist anthropology,

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<sup>358</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 79.

which is learning to see the resourcefulness of women in cultures where they had hitherto been reported to be passive victims of male manipulation."<sup>359</sup> With this awareness of the limitations of the exercise and the assumptions upon which it is based, I now move toward an ethnography of Homer's *Odyssey*.

### **Toward an Ethnography of the *Odyssey***

We may be quite sure that Odysseus and Penelope did not conduct themselves like Victoria and Albert. But how did they act? What was the appropriate cultural code followed or violated by Homer's characters? In the main we have to reconstruct this from the opinions and actions of the characters, allowing that what we read in the *Odyssey* is not a real society but a fictional case-study, one which presumably made sense to the real women and men who were its audience and who could appreciate both its verisimilitude in matters of human motivation and its archaizing idealization in matters of material culture.

– Winkler 1990, 133

#### *Homer's world*

John Winkler's queries set in context the importance of the cultural parameters within which the characters of the *Odyssey* operated. If we assume that the world of the *Odyssey* "made sense" to its audience, then we can also argue that the events and social rules evident in the *Odyssey* are familiar to audience members and perhaps evident in the world around them. While we cannot presume that events and relationships in the *Odyssey* directly mirror events and relationships in Homer's Greece, our assumption that the two environments are similar enables us to use the *Odyssey*—along with evidence from other contemporary literary works, archaeology and modern anthropology—to reconstruct a plausible ethnography for the text.

We know that the world through Homer's eyes differed significantly from our view of the world today. First, Homer's world was much smaller than ours: a flat disc with a radius of about two thousand kilometres (an area roughly twelve and a half million square kilometres) with Greece at its geographical (and cultural) centre.<sup>360</sup> Homer's world did not exist in an infinite universe or "space" as we

<sup>359</sup> Winkler 1990, 130.

<sup>360</sup> Mireaux 1959, 19.

conceive it today. Rather, the world consisted of the *known*—that is, what one could see or explore—and the *unknown*—that which had not yet been seen or explored. As Mireaux (1959) observes, “For Homer there was no infinity, there was only the incomplete.”<sup>361</sup>

This finite, limited world was not only home to man and beast, but to a host of other more mysterious and supernatural creatures: Man shared his environment with nymphs, ogres, demons and other spirits who inhabited natural objects, embodying the very essence of the natural world in which man found himself. These creatures may be kindly disposed toward their human counterparts, or they may be dangerous; maintaining their goodwill and not offending them was key to peaceful co-existence. Man’s actions in the natural world thus presumed a response from those supernatural beings whom his actions affected: sailing on a long journey homeward depended on the mercy of the spirits of the sea, cutting down a tree to build a home risked an unfavourable response from the spirits of the forest, diverting a stream for irrigation purposes or using a river for transport or fishing required the goodwill of the river spirits. No action could be taken without first considering how one’s plans might appease or offend the beings that potentially had a profound influence on an individual’s fate.<sup>362</sup>

The gods, too, played an active role in daily life, and maintaining their good favour was a primary aim in ancient Greece. The gods were not all-powerful, but they had the power to make the life of human beings either pleasant or miserable, and though all men “naturally are not on as familiar terms with the gods as the heroes of epic,” anyone may at any time “encounter a deity of greater or lesser stature, at the turn of the road or on the edge of a wood, in the mists of dawn or nightfall, or on the threshold of his own house. He will be well advised to recognize the god as such immediately, so as to proffer a timely request or offer some sacrifice.”<sup>363</sup> It is in these beliefs that we find explanation in part for the practice of *xenia* (guest-friendship), or the generosity and hospitality shown to strangers or those far away from home. Hosting a stranger not only demonstrates the

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<sup>361</sup> Mireaux 1959, 23.

<sup>362</sup> Mireaux 1959, 27.

<sup>363</sup> Mireaux 1959, 25-26.

magnanimity and wealth of the host and helps to ensure a reciprocal welcome should the host or his family ever find themselves strangers in a strange land; it also guards against offending any gods who may be masquerading as strangers seeking welcome.

Ultimately, however, one's lot in life was not directed entirely by one's actions, but by one's predetermined destiny. In ancient Greece, the three Fates, the *Moi'rai*, determined a man's (and even a god's) destiny. One of the Fates spun the thread of a man's life, another measured it out and the third cut it to a predetermined length. A man's actions simply ensured that his life "spun out" in the manner the Fates had intended. In Greek myth, even if a character attempts to avoid a fated destiny, he or she finds that decisions made and actions taken in order to avoid whatever outcome he or she wished to avoid serve in the end only to bring about the fulfillment of the Fates' intentions.<sup>364</sup> Through their spinning of destinies—of man, of gods, of things—the *Moi'rai* ensure the world maintains a certain balance, one that is not disrupted by the base personal desires of either mortal man or immortal god.

#### *Ethical and social codes*

A particular code of ethics and social responsibilities pervades the world of the *Odyssey*: Honour and *kleos* (renown), loyalty, duty and a pattern of ongoing deception define both character and action in the poem. These sensibilities are not, of course, unique to the *Odyssey* or to ancient Greece: concepts such as honour, fame, loyalty, duty and duplicity are characteristic of various social and political environments. What differs from culture to culture is the manner in which these ethical and social codes are carried out. How, then, do the characters in the *Odyssey* adhere to these codes? How might the manner in which they do so reflect elements of the cultural and ethical environment of Homer's Greece? Once we have determined possible answers to these questions, we should be able to propose how

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<sup>364</sup> Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of such an attempt to avoid fate is a later version of the myth of Achilles, in which the mother of the prophesied Trojan War hero dunks her young son into the River Styx in order to ensure his immortality. Thetis forgets to wet her son's heel, however, and it is an arrow in Achilles' heel that is his downfall in the battle for Troy. Though this version of the story first appears considerably later than Homer's epic, the example exemplifies the Greek understanding of the power of destiny.

the poetic environment of the poem serves as an ideal background against which Homer is able to set not only those cultural codes indicative of the poet's own physical environment but also subversions of those cultural codes, suggesting how Homer conceives of resistance to political and social structures in ancient Greece and—as illustrated in the case of Penelope—what resources might be available to Greek women who desired to manipulate social or political circumstances to their advantage.

In the *Constraints of Desire* (1990), John J. Winkler suggests that work by ethnographers and anthropologists in modern-day rural Greece can shed light on our interpretations of Homer<sup>365</sup>: “there is one external source which can be used to fill in the outlines of the cultural picture found in the *Odyssey* itself, and that is description of life in rural Greece today. Such descriptions emphasize the honor of families, the competition between them for the limited resources of material goods and spiritual honor, and the strategies of violence and deception that must (alas) be practiced to preserve honor and avoid shame in this wretched world of ours.” Winkler is quick to caution against such observations being used “to read anything into the *Odyssey* that is not there.” Rather, where the environment created by Homer in the epic seems unfamiliar or mysterious, we can look to the social and political environment of contemporary rural Greece to “open our urban eyes, accustomed to television and rear-view mirrors, to the clean dirt streets of pre-industrial societies, where the gossip of neighbors and the smell of goats are equally rank.”<sup>366</sup> If we look at the world of the *Odyssey* from a perspective gained by our study of a culture that was shaped by many of the same forces that shaped the environment of Homer, we gain insights (into both cultures) that we miss if we attempt to interpret the *Odyssey* from a wholly unrelated vantage point.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> On modern ethnography of rural Greece, Winkler (1990) cites primarily the work of Walcot 1970; du Boulay 1976 and 1974; Campbell 1964; and Friedl 1962.

<sup>366</sup> Winkler 1990, 133-34.

<sup>367</sup> I extend Winkler's caution here: we must be careful not to draw any firm conclusions about the environments of Homer and Odysseus based on modern anthropology. It could be argued that research into the social and political environment of any oral-traditional, rural environment would “open our urban eyes” in a similar way. But the apparent similarities between the *Odyssey*'s cultural environment and that observed in modern Greece are significant and invite a deeper comparison. While similarities do not on their own prove a “genetic” link between two cultures, a similarity between the ancient environment of the *Odyssey* and modern rural Greece is perhaps more likely to

For Winkler, two of the key cultural elements exemplified by these contemporary ethnographies are honour and the importance of deception in the maintenance of honour. Both of these elements are prevalent throughout the *Odyssey* as well: lying, duplicity and secrecy are practised as a matter of course by all the primary characters in the poem—in some cases, it seems, as a matter of habit rather than necessity.<sup>368</sup> In the poem, lying is not simply the telling of false tales: rather, it is part of “a policy of systematic and deliberate misdirection, in matters great and small, in order to protect oneself in a social environment full of enemies and charged with unremitting suspicion.”<sup>369</sup> This definition of lying seems borne out by modern anthropological investigations: one researcher finds that in a particular Greek village, “people not only lie to conceal their faults, since enemies will spread news of those faults and damage a family’s honor, but also to conceal even trivial facts, since any information that gets out might turn out to be useful in another context.”<sup>370</sup> In this environment, “Even friends and relatives outside the immediate family are not to be trusted, because those relationships often go sour and former friends will certainly use their knowledge of your weaknesses against you.”<sup>371</sup> In the *Odyssey*—what Winkler calls “a sort of case-study in the tensions and behaviors usually found between families rather than inside a household”<sup>372</sup>—Homer explores what happens when even one’s immediate family members are not safe from one’s need to exercise “the social necessity of cunning.”

In ancient Greece, an individual obtained *kleos*, the Greek equivalent of immortality and longevity, through his offspring or through his deeds. Jesper Svenbro discusses the Greek custom of naming children after the deeds of the parent to garner *kleos*: calling the name of the child aloud invoked the memory of the ancestor. Epic poetry also achieved *kleos* for both the poet and those named in the

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suggest historical continuity than a similarity between the environment of the *Odyssey* and that of modern urban Delhi, for example. Ultimately, however, while we can use twentieth-century ethnography to broaden and deepen our understanding of the *Odyssey*, we cannot use it to say anything definitive about the environment of the *Odyssey* or the environment of Homer.

<sup>368</sup> As Winkler suggests of Odysseus’s deception of Laertes, which has no apparent purpose and about which even Odysseus himself expresses ambivalence (*O.* 24.235–40).

<sup>369</sup> Winkler 1990, 135.

<sup>370</sup> Winkler 1990, 135, citing the work of Du Boulay 1976 at 399.

<sup>371</sup> Winkler 1990, 135.

<sup>372</sup> Winkler 1990, 134.

poem. Later, written inscriptions would garner *kleos* for (frequently) the writer and (certainly) the individual who had commissioned or was named in the inscription. Each time the inscription was read, the reader literally gave voice to the words inscribed, sounding aloud the writer's and/or commissioner's or deed-doer's name for as long as the inscription could be viewed and read.<sup>373</sup> The Greek conception of honour was closely tied to *kleos*. Though *kleos* was most commonly associated with notable deeds, or the deeds or names of one's children and ancestors, it was not limited to fame through heroic exploits. Likewise, honour was not limited to that achieved on the battlefield. One's exceptional fulfillment of familial obligations could also garner both honour and *kleos* for the individual and the individual's family. For example, though she embarks on no odyssey of her own—indeed, she does not leave the confines of her own home—Penelope achieves renown not only by fulfilling her obligations to preserve the household and reputation of her son and her husband, but by doing so amidst extraordinary pressure to fulfill another social obligation, to remarry.<sup>374</sup> In fact, Penelope's renown stems in part from her ability to navigate a particularly difficult course: she faces two conflicting social obligations—as Odysseus's widow, to choose a new husband (or allow a husband to be chosen for her) and, as Odysseus's wife, to maintain and protect his household until her husband's return, or until Telemachus is of age. Within the parameters of the poem, she achieves both objectives, a seemingly impossible task: She protects Odysseus's home while Telemachus is too young to be able to protect it himself, by stringing along every member of a crowd of voracious suitors, each of whom acts as a personal bodyguard, protecting his (perceived) future wife and his (perceived) future assets (Penelope's dowry) from the other suitors, and from any potential outside threat. By maintaining a close, flirtatious relationship with the suitors, Penelope is also in a position to know of the suitors' plot to kill Telemachus, and to use this knowledge to further pit the suitors against each other.<sup>375</sup> At the same time, her strategy enables her to present herself as willing to fulfill her social obligation to

<sup>373</sup> Svenbro 1988, 44-79.

<sup>374</sup> Penelope's *kleos* is a topic of conversation even in the Underworld (Books 11, 24).

<sup>375</sup> See especially her speech to Antinoös, Book 16, lines 409-33, and Eurymachos's reply to her and the other suitors, lines 435-51.

remarry, all the while soliciting gifts from the suitors (gifts that would enhance the wealth of Odysseus's household) and encouraging competition amongst the men for her hand.

In our modern, Western cultural understanding, loyalty and duplicity are not particularly compatible: one does not set out to deceive those to whom one feels loyalty. Indeed, we are likely to see purposeful deception as indicative of one's *disloyalty* to an individual. The *Odyssey* challenges this ethical framework: Loyalty to a particular individual does not preclude deceiving that individual. Ultimately, we must consider the possibility that in Homer's world, loyalty and deception are not always incompatible. In some cases, and under certain circumstances, preserving loyalty and family honour may even demand the deception of family and friends. And in the world of the *Odyssey*, skill in deception earns the profound respect of others as a survival skill, even if the deception negatively affects the observer. For example, the suitors "respect Penelope *because* she has deceived them for so long. No greater epitaph can be given to any heroine than is bestowed on her, 'to have good character / and cleverness ... for none knew thoughts so wise as those Penelope knew.'<sup>376</sup> To be cunning in this society earns respect, for it constitutes the ability to stay alive.<sup>377</sup>

Odysseus's willingness to deceive both his wife and his father throws into relief the relationship between loyalty and duplicity. Odysseus deceives his father and his wife just as he does the suitors who are taking advantage of his absence. But his feelings for his father and his wife are clearly not similar to his feelings for the suitors. While it could be argued that he deceives Penelope because he does not wholly trust her,<sup>378</sup> there is no obvious reason within the parameters of the poem for the deception of Laertes.<sup>379</sup> We must consider the likelihood that neither Odysseus's

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<sup>376</sup> See *O.* 2:116-19, 121.

<sup>377</sup> Kruger 2001, 76.

<sup>378</sup> Perhaps Agamemnon's wry warning, stemming from his own particularly unfortunate first-hand experience of marital deception, still haunts Odysseus: "So by thus, do not be too easy even with your wife, / nor give her an entire account of all you are sure of. / Tell her part of it, but let the rest be hidden in silence" (*O.* 11.441-43).

<sup>379</sup> See the discussion elsewhere on using modern Greek behaviour to interpret ancient texts. Winkler (1990) suggests, following others, that lying and deception may be such integral elements of social interaction in certain communities that "the willingness to deceive, not only for defensive and aggressive purposes, but simply as a habit of life—to keep in practice as it were" can result in an

trust in an individual nor his familial relationship with that individual ultimately determines whether or not he takes that person into his confidence. Deception is a wholly strategic tool.

Telemachus wields deception with equal skill, also as a tool rather than as an indication of his loyalty or trust. Not only does he keep secret from his mother the identity of the beggar, but he himself willingly engages in Odysseus's deception, there being no better example of this than his announcement to the entire hall of his role as head of the household, even with Odysseus in the room:

Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her [Penelope] in answer:  
 'My mother, no Achaian man has more authority  
 over this bow than I, to give or withhold, at my pleasure;  
 not one of those who are lords here in rocky Ithaka,  
 not one of those in the islands off horse-pasturing Elis;  
 no one can force me against my will; if I want, I can give it  
 to the stranger as an outright gift, to take away with him.  
 Go therefore back into the house, and take up your own work,  
 The loom and distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens  
 ply their work also. The men shall have the bow in their keeping,  
 all men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household.'<sup>380</sup>

This speech is arguably deceptive for other reasons as well. In speaking so boldly to his mother Telemachus also sends a veiled message to Odysseus, along the lines of "Beware: though I am your son, and loyal to you, I hold your fate in my hands. At this moment, I could betray you and take over the household or I could remain faithful to you at some disadvantage to myself." At this moment, like no other up to this point, "the power in this household" is indeed in Telemachus's hands. At the same time, Telemachus's seemingly disparaging remark to Penelope—"take up your own work"—is not simply the equivalent of "leave the fighting to the men." Rather, Telemachus imparts to Penelope his suspicions that her previous words disguise her true thoughts—an unwillingness to acknowledge his role as master of the house, for example (as this would relegate her from the position of Odysseus's wife to the less powerful position of Odysseus's widow), or her strong suspicion that the beggar is

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environment in which "even close family relations ... are not exempt from painful teasing, indeed they may be a privileged site for learning to cope with the world's jabs, and Odysseus may simply be falling into an old family habit when he temporarily breaks the heart of his father" (136).

<sup>380</sup> Book 21, lines 343-53.

Odysseus in disguise. But in specifying Penelope's work as that of "the loom and distaff," Telemachus also signals to Penelope his general approval of the deceptive tactics she is using, even as he lets her know they do not fool him. If he wished to be simply disparaging, he could have told Penelope to go to her room; instead, he uses another phrase—one that *sounds* appropriately masterful and disparaging to the listening suitors, but one that immediately calls to mind what Homer has repeatedly used as the metaphorical equivalent of deception: weaving. In this way, Telemachus tells Penelope (in veiled, coded terms that only she will understand) to continue with the deception for the time being for the sake of the suitors—and then suggests that she "see to it that your handmaidens ply their work also." In other words, Telemachus warns her, in front of the suitors, that he has things under control (that essentially this is *his* deception and not hers), to allow him for now to play his role as master of the house, to keep her suspicions about Odysseus to herself, and to ensure that she and her handmaidens maintain secrecy.

Penelope's fidelity to Odysseus and Odysseus's household is both praised and questioned by the *Odyssey's* characters; her weaving can be read as a symbol of her feminine virtue, her chastity, her loyalty as wife and mother and her domestic capabilities as the mistress of Ithaka. Her "unweaving" on the other hand reflects her duplicity, her secrecy and her ambiguity—ultimately her "unknowability"—as wife and mother. No one, including the audience, can be sure where Penelope's loyalties lie, as her actions seem designed to deceive and misdirect. As Winkler observes, "Penelope imitates different women in order to deceive different men, as she takes on the feigned role of 'your future bride' to each suitor in turn. She also *imitates* the stereotypical good and simple housewife, as she weaves her shroud each day."<sup>381</sup> Each time we are reminded of Penelope's faithfulness and adherence to duty (by the remarks of other characters, or by her own remarks and actions, such as the weaving of Laertes' shroud), we are also reminded of her skill at deception. We cannot trust Penelope when she laments that Odysseus is dead, as her actions suggest that she

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<sup>381</sup> Winkler 1990, 141 (emphasis in original).

does not wholly believe this lament herself.<sup>382</sup> Neither can we trust Penelope when she seems not to recognize Odysseus until Book 23. Various scholars have argued that Penelope's actions and words suggest she knows exactly who the beggar is, or at least has strong suspicions, and imparts this knowledge to Odysseus without saying so directly with her suggestion of the contest of the bow.<sup>383</sup> Ultimately, we cannot know if anything Penelope says or does is reflective of what she is really thinking.

### *The role of women*

In the Homeric household, as in households of the classical period, a woman lived under the protection of a man—her father, brother, husband or another male guardian—who would generally arrange her marriage and “had the capacity otherwise to ‘ratify’ her ... actions, i.e., to make them socially or legally efficacious.”<sup>384</sup> In larger households the women lived and slept separately from the men. In Odysseus's palace, for example, the ground-floor apartments of the women's quarters housed both servants and concubines; it was here that the spinning and weaving, as well as other domestic labour, took place. The man of the house might typically have a sleeping chamber on the ground floor of the women's apartments and invite his wife or another woman to share his bed whenever he wished. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's quarters are on the second floor above the banquet hall; this is the room that houses the marriage bed that Odysseus built, and it is in the privacy of her bedchamber that she unravels her weaving at night. Women did not share meals in the banquet hall with the men and other guests, although they might join those in the banquet hall after the meal, “[presiding] over the gathering

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<sup>382</sup> Winkler (1990) sees “confident assertions in the face of ambiguity” as another form of duplicity typical of characters in the *Odyssey*: “Uncertainty typifies the mental states of characters in the early books—is Odysseus alive or dead, should Penelope remarry and if so by what procedure, are the suitors paying appropriate court to Penelope? The questions are interdependent and insoluble, but this does not prevent characters from articulating positions which sound like statements of fact but whose actual meaning in context is somewhat less dogmatic. For instance, at various points in the narrative Penelope, Laertes, and Telemakhos state in unambiguous terms that Odysseus is dead, even though what they mean is something slightly less categorical, along the lines of ‘I’m not such a fool as to cherish a remote hope for his return, however much I fondly desire it’” (137).

<sup>383</sup> See the argument on how to read Penelope below.

<sup>384</sup> Katz 1991, 35.

and [directing] the conversation,"<sup>385</sup> as befitted the notable female figures of a household, valued for their beauty, wit and charm.

In Greek literature, the qualities of a good woman are, generally, those that increase her value to others. Thus, a virtuous woman is one whose actions are designed to uphold her husband's reputation and the reputation of his family. A good wife obeys her husband, is skilled in the domestic arts (especially wool-working), manages her household and expenses wisely and is not idle. A good woman acts, dresses and speaks modestly so as not to bring shame upon her family. Where a woman's desires are discussed at all, they are discussed in terms of her desire to pacify others rather than satisfy herself: she *desires* to not dishonour her husband's reputation or the reputation of his family; she *desires* to be virtuous and modest and to be seen as such by others. A woman who follows a desire quite clearly in opposition to her family's interests, as for example Helen does in the *Iliad* when she sets sail with her lover, damages not only her own virtue and honour but also sullies the name of her husband and her family as well as, arguably, the reputation of women generally.<sup>386</sup>

Rozsika Parker argues in *The Subversive Stitch* that what constitutes femininity and "women-ness" in a particular society, and hence "the behaviour expected and encouraged in women," is less related to qualities supposedly inherent in women than to particular social conditions: "the conviction that femininity is natural to women (and unnatural in men) is tenacious. It is a crucial aspect of patriarchal ideology, sanctioning a rigid and oppressive division of labour."<sup>387</sup> We find at least circumstantial support for this argument in the literature of ancient Greece, where the bulk of our evidence comes from male writers who describe a world in which women are perceived as inferior by the male characters who speak of them. This picture is complicated by the fact that female characters in Greek literature often recognize and comment on their lesser social status, and frequently seem to support, or at the very least accept (albeit sometimes with regret or lamentation), the social

<sup>385</sup> Mireaux 1959, 207.

<sup>386</sup> For example, the shade of Agamemnon accuses Clytemnestra ("she with thoughts surpassingly grisly") of "[splashing] the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women / still to come, even on the one whose acts are virtuous" (*O.* 11.432-34).

<sup>387</sup> Parker 1984, 2-3.

framework that places the Greek woman in such a limited and limiting position. Of course, these female characters are generally written by male authors—authors who may display profound insight into the frustration a woman might feel with her role in a patriarchal social system at the same time that they demonstrate a dextrous command of the arguments as to why the system should be so.

It is difficult to separate what we know of the women of ancient Greece from what Homer and other ancient authors tell us about the women of ancient Greece. We have little in the way of writing by ancient Greek women themselves,<sup>388</sup> and the work that women engaged in most often—child-rearing, textile production, household management, for example—is not the sort of work generally immortalized in song or literature, and does not weather either the elements or time in a manner that lends itself to archaeological discovery:

We know about the development of [men's] ways of building and fighting, their political, philosophical and religious ideas, even their dreams; but their total lack of interest in the actions of their female contemporaries—cooking, washing, spinning, weaving, pregnancy, childbirth, caring for children, to say nothing of their feelings and emotions—deprives us of that history .... Greek women were in the shade, and stayed there.<sup>389</sup>

Pierre Brulé's pronouncement may be overly harsh,<sup>390</sup> but it is difficult to argue with his wry observation that "to be born a woman vastly diminishes the likelihood of an individual leaving any traces in history; and the handicap is cumulative, so much so that if the problems of poverty, political exclusion and inferior status are added, women are likely to be consigned to oblivion."<sup>391</sup> In Greece, at any rate, it was primarily the deeds of men that were celebrated in poetry and song, which was generally written by men, resulting to some extent in a sort of self-perpetuating cult of celebrity: those individuals writing history were often also those individuals

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<sup>388</sup> According to Lefkowitz and Fant (2005), besides poetry, "women's writing survives only in private letters written on papyrus, preserved, by an accident of nature, only from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt," and "[m]uch of what remains was preserved because men in late antiquity and the Middle Ages felt it to have enduring value"—facts which, along with the celebration in the ancient world of "men's work" over "women's work," make it both "logical and poignant that we should have so little of what women wrote" (Lefkowitz and Fant, 1).

<sup>389</sup> Brulé 2003, 2.

<sup>390</sup> Certainly Homer shows keen interest in weaving, for example, though often as a metaphor for deception rather than as an activity carried out solely by women.

<sup>391</sup> Brulé 2003, 1.

making history. The presence in poetry and song of those members of society who did not partake in celebration-worthy activities—slaves, women, young children—is frequently peripheral or supportive of the male hero's role. Activities not celebrated in one generation are not likely to be considered "celebration-worthy" by the next generation because the portrayals of those activities available for the review and enjoyment of future generations are not particularly favourable, laudatory or heroic.<sup>392</sup>

Not only do most of our representations of women in the ancient world come to us via the perspective of men, but the world in which women lived was, to a large extent, circumscribed by men. In a sense, men determined which roles women would play in the ancient world, and then also interpreted for posterity how women performed these roles. As Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant observe, we must rely on the words of men "to tell us about the social, legal, and physical environments in which ancient women lived, since the course of women's lives, from birth to death, was set by men, fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, by the male citizens by whom governments were formed and armies raised."<sup>393</sup> Thus, not only do we catch only glimpses of the ancient Greek woman in literature and other representations of the ancient world, but those glimpses are reflections of the ancient Greek woman as seen by men or (in the case of Homer, for example) as offered by men to an audience, most likely for a purpose other than presenting an example of the typical "Greek woman" to a population doubtless already familiar with numerous examples. But if we discard the presentations of women offered us by men, we have almost no image of women in ancient Greece at all. So although "it would be an illusion to think we had gained access this way to women's intimate thoughts, or even their view of the world,"<sup>394</sup> we must use what evidence we have,

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<sup>392</sup> It could be suggested, for example, that weaving—an activity performed in Greece primarily by women—is not "celebration-worthy" on its own. That is, we do not find the *activity of weaving* celebrated. More frequently we find the activity of weaving used symbolically in conjunction with a description of femininity or feminine virtue (or to emphasize, in juxtaposition, a woman's craftiness and her ability to distract men from the work at hand, as it arguably does in the descriptions of the nymph Calypso and the witch Circe in the *Odyssey*). Weaving as an activity is celebrated only when it is a metaphor for other, more "celebration-worthy" activities, such as the composition of oral poetry, the weaving of a persuasive argument or the development of politically strategic deception.

<sup>393</sup> Lefkowitz and Fant 2005 [1982], 1.

<sup>394</sup> Brulé 2003, 2.

and attempt to find a “real” woman inside the male representation of woman. Brulé articulates the problem this way: “My search for Greek women is thus presented with a challenge: to disengage them from the masculine screen that falls between them and my gaze and to catch a glimpse of that ‘everyday world’ of theirs, tucked away in the heart of the discourse of a culture which took so little notice of them. But since only the words of men are audible, there is no other way than to listen to them carefully.”<sup>395</sup>

Our search for the ancient Greek woman is hampered by yet another limit circumscribed by the nature of the evidence to hand, one that underscores the necessity of moving toward a cultural ethnography of ancient Greece at the same time that we attempt to sketch out an ethnography of the *Odyssey*. The nature of dramatic literature (and performance poetry) is that, “though [it draws] on the social and cultural context, [it] often imagines situations, quite deliberately, that are the reverse of the norm and the contrary of the possible.”<sup>396</sup> By creating unrealistically hostile, magical or mysterious situations, the playwright (or poet) intensifies the emotional predicament of his characters, forcing them into decisions and action that further the plot and bring about a dramatically satisfying conclusion. This telescoping on the part of the writer also brings into focus those details of social and political relationships that in real life may be invisible to outsiders or too subtle to easily see, or that may occur across distances or periods of time that make observation difficult. Where we wish to examine the role of women in ancient Greece, suggests K.R. Walters, “the words and deeds of these literary heroines cannot be used to explain social reality. In fact, the reverse is the case. It is first necessary to understand the social reality in order to come to grips with the meaning of dramatic literature.”<sup>397</sup>

Given these limitations, our search for the Greek woman seems doomed to be only partially successful. But our exploration will also help deepen our understanding of the ancient Greek man, of his cultural perceptions as well as the social systems in which he operated: For the male representation of the female tells

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<sup>395</sup> Brulé 2003, 2.

<sup>396</sup> Walters 2003, 194.

<sup>397</sup> Walters 2003, 194.

us about man's relationship with woman, about his desires and fears, about his confidence and insecurity, and about how these elements might help shape the cultural environment in which he creates representations of the female. In this type of investigation, inevitably "women will not be alone on stage."<sup>398</sup> By seeking the feminine under such limiting conditions, then, we find much more than the feminine: we begin to reveal the cultural environment of the male/female interaction, the world of both women *and* men in ancient Greece.

While it is possible to find varied and colourful portrayals of women throughout the corpus of Greek literature, the nature of these portrayals "contains enough invariables to defy time." Two common themes prevail: the generally low opinion on the part of men of women's minds and character, and the tension in the relationship between men and women, a relationship circumscribed in large part by the presumed deficiencies of the female half of the species, and the role ascribed to women as a result: "there is little so consonant in men's discourse on women as their sad refrain of ill-will towards them." This undercurrent of what in a modern Western context would be deemed unacceptably sexist, if not misogynistic, is the "permanent backdrop" against which we must interpret Greek literature and art, even though, as Brulé points out, this backdrop "temporarily assumes new colours"<sup>399</sup> over time and in various situations dictated by ever-shifting political and cultural circumstances.

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<sup>398</sup> Brulé 2003, 2.

<sup>399</sup> Brulé 2003, 31. Some scholars disagree, suggesting that the role of women in ancient Greece was not as horrific as Brulé suggests. For example, Brulé speaks of the prospective husband buying his bride by way of gifts or other favours for the bride's family, and observes that "women can be given, bought and won, even if only to make them work." (68). Emile Mireaux (writing some decades earlier) would disagree: "The wife was in no way, as is still repeated by certain writers, the property or thing of her husband. He was her master; he could punish or repudiate her, if she seriously compromised the interest of his house; he could even kill her in case of adultery, though he took care not to do so, for he would otherwise incur the vengeance which was obligatory on her family. The wife nevertheless possessed vague but unquestionable rights" (1959, 211). It is clear from both descriptions that a woman did not have the sort of rights or freedoms we associate with women today, and the questions of whether or not a woman is "owned" or "bought" is merely a question of interpretation, which in turn is shaped by the social and cultural (and undoubtedly ethnocentric) perspective of the observer. The pertinent question seems to me not to be "Do we think that women were the property of men?" but rather "Did the people of ancient Greece (women *and* men) regard women as the property of men?" The question is difficult to answer, not least because our cultural perspective and definitions are so utterly different from those exhibited in the ancient Greek literature. What does seem clear, however, is that the differing social status of men and women caused sometimes excessive friction and clearly observable emotional anguish, enough that male authors were able to hear and write eloquently of a woman's dissatisfaction or despair at her social lot

In their very useful collection *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A source book in translation* (2005), Lefkowitz and Fant present a series of texts and text fragments by and about women in the ancient world. Though the book contains few texts from the time period we are investigating (few seventh-century examples are extant), it is possible to build up a very general picture of women in ancient Greece and the perception men had of them.

Hesiod's early-seventh-century *Works and Days*, "read as a school text throughout antiquity,"<sup>400</sup> sets the tone that prevails throughout much of the Greek literature that has survived from later centuries. In the poem, as punishment for man's crimes against Zeus, the Olympians present man with Pandora, the metaphorical representation of woman: she is graceful, with the "fair form of a virgin," a "cruel passion," "worries that gnaw at the limbs," "a bitch's mind," and "a thieving heart." Before the gods created Pandora, the world of man was "without evils and without harsh labour and cruel diseases which give men over to the Fates." But Pandora opens the jar in which these evils are kept, and misery and sickness escape into the world of man.<sup>401</sup> Later, Hesiod's advice to the prospective husband recalls the poem's earlier cautionary tale: A man's first consideration in seeking a wife should be his need to keep that "bitch's mind" and her "thieving heart" under control:

You are at the right age to bring a wife to your house when you are not much less than thirty, and not much more. This is the right time for marriage. Your wife should be four years past puberty and be married to you in the fifth. Marry a virgin, so you can teach her good habits. The best one to marry is the girl who lives near you; look over her in detail, so you don't marry one who'll bring joy to your neighbours [i.e., by being unfaithful and giving the neighbours something to laugh about]. For a man can win nothing better than a good wife, and nothing more painful than a bad one.<sup>402</sup>

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at the same time that they could argue equally persuasively the common male view that by nature women are inferior to men.

<sup>400</sup> Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 23.

<sup>401</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 42-105, in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 23-24.

<sup>402</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 695-705; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 24-25.

Semonides (6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) famously lists the various types of female mind in a piece that Lefkowitz and Fant suggest is likely a social satire.<sup>403</sup> According to Semonides, the type of woman made from a “long-bristled sow” is dirty and “sits by the dungheap and grows fat.” The woman made from a “wicked vixen” “knows everything.” The one made from a bitch is “always yapping,” and “a man cannot stop her by threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking out her teeth with a stone, nor with honeyed words, not even if she is sitting with friends, but ceaselessly she keeps up a barking you can do nothing with.” The woman made from earth is “a stunted creature” who understands only eating. Another woman is made of the sea, whom she “most resembles in her temper; like the ocean, she has a changeful nature.” The woman who resembles the ass “has suffered many blows” and when scolded “she puts up with everything, much against her will, and does her work to satisfaction.” But “when she comes to acts of love, she accepts any partner.” The woman made from a ferret is a “miserable, wretched creature” who is “mad for the bed of love” but makes her lovers sick. The woman born of a mare makes others work but does nothing herself, and the woman born of a monkey is ugly, has a “hideous face,” is “short in the neck,” “has no bottom, and is all legs.” She “spends the whole day planning, how she can do someone the worst possible harm.” But he who wins the woman made from a bee is truly a lucky man: “She causes his property to grow and increase, and she grows old with a husband whom she loves and who loves her, the mother of a handsome and reputable family. She stands out among all women, and a godlike beauty plays about her. She takes no pleasure in sitting among women in places where they tell stories about love.”<sup>404</sup>

The dubious character of women is a frequent subject of irony in Greek dramatic literature. A fourth-century play includes this lament to Zeus: “O Zeus, why need one say evil of women in detail? It would be enough if you say merely woman.”<sup>405</sup> One of the characters in a play by Eubulus (4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) remarks, “I wish the second

<sup>403</sup> Satire or no, it is important that the “good behaviour” of a woman (as exemplified by the woman “made from a bee”) is valued in terms of its benefit to others. In Semonides’ work, a woman’s worth is measured “in terms of service to a woman’s husband, not by its intrinsic value to the society as a whole, or by a woman’s worth to other women or to herself” (Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 25).

<sup>404</sup> From Semonides, *On Women*, tr. H. Lloyd-Jones; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 25-27.

<sup>405</sup> Carcinus II, *Semele*, TGrF Fr. 70 F3. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 29.

man who took a wife would die an awful death. I don't blame the first man; he had no experience of that evil. The second man knew what kind of evil a wife was!"<sup>406</sup> The "prison" of marriage is also a common theme ("Poor men! We sold away our freedom of speech and our comfort and lead the life of slaves with our wives."<sup>407</sup>), and a man is never as happy with his wife as he is with an unmarried lover ("For a wife remains at home contemptuous because of the law, but a 'companion' [*hetaera*] knows that a man must be bought by her attentions or she will need to go and find another."<sup>408</sup>)

Yet amidst these unflattering images of women presented by the male characters of ancient literature, we also see women through the eyes of female characters—albeit female characters drawn by men. These examples suggest that male authors were well aware of the likely disadvantages of being a woman in ancient Greece or, at least, the disadvantages of having to play the particular role created for women by men. Medea contends that a woman's challenges in life far outweigh those of a man—emotionally, economically and physically. And ultimately, a woman does not have the same remedies as a man available to her to deal with unhappiness and dissatisfaction:

Of all creatures who live and have intelligence, we women are the most miserable. First of all, we must buy a husband by vast expenditure of wealth, in order to obtain a master for our body. This is a greater misery than the dowry, because everything depends on whether we get a bad husband or a good husband .... A man, when he becomes unhappy with the people inside his home, goes out and puts an end to the ache in his heart ... (246) but we must look to that one man alone. People say that we women lead a life without danger inside our homes, while men fight in war; but they are wrong. I would rather serve three times as in battle than give birth once.<sup>409</sup>

In Sophocles' *Tereus*, Procne condemns the power that men wield over the lives of women, a power that—ironically—grows as a woman ages. A woman is more limited in her freedom as an adult than she is as a child, for a grown woman is more valuable than a child as both a commodity and a consort. One of the implications of

<sup>406</sup> Eubulus, fragment from a lost play, Fr. 77 PCG; Chrysis, Fr. 115 PCG. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 29.

<sup>407</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Alexis, Fr. 150 PCG. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 30.

<sup>408</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Amphis, Fr. 1 PCG. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 30.

<sup>409</sup> 431 BCE. Euripides, *Medea*, lines 230-51; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 11.

Procne's speech is that as an adult, a woman's worth as a human being is greater within the walls of a man's household, where she has material value to her husband even if her personal happiness is of little consequence to him; outside, however, she is worthless, her virtue now open to question and her personal safety threatened by those who would do her harm:

But now outside my father's house, I am nothing, yes often I have looked on women's nature in this regard, that we are nothing. Young women, in my opinion, have the sweetest existence known to mortals in their fathers' homes, for their innocence always keeps children safe and happy. But when we reach puberty and can understand, we are thrust out and sold away from our ancestral gods and from our parents. Some go to strange men's homes, others to foreigners', some to joyless houses, some to hostile. And all this once the first night has yoked us to our husband, we are forced to praise and to say that all is well.<sup>410</sup>

Two examples from Euripides, often cited for his misogynistic views, illustrate male sensitivity (at least on the part of this playwright), to both the ill will towards women and the cultural framework that supports and perpetuates this ill will. In the first, an argument between Andromache and Hermione illustrates how the obligation on the part of a woman to subvert her own passions and desires in the interests of her husband is one that finds support even amongst women (or, rather, amongst women as Euripides writes them<sup>411</sup>). Andromache has borne Neoptolemus a son and is accused by Hermione, Neoptolemus's wife, of using magical charms to prevent Hermione herself from getting pregnant. Hermione wishes to have Andromache put to death. Andromache argues that it is not her own actions that have resulted in Hermione's unhappiness, but rather Hermione's shortcomings as a wife. She then accuses Hermione of endangering the good name of women everywhere:

Your husband doesn't hate you because of my drugs, but because you don't provide what he needs to cohabit with you—that's the magic spell you want: it

<sup>410</sup> Mid-5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, Sophocles, *Tereus*, Fr. 583 Radt. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 12-13.

<sup>411</sup> Again, we come up against this ambiguity: Do we see in this example a reflection of attitudes expressed by Greek women? Or do we see instead the egoistic, male view of the female perspective? Or do we simply see an imaginary scene constructed solely to further a narratological sequence? Although ultimately we cannot know if a woman of ancient Greece might have reasoned as Andromache does, Euripides likely presents a scene that would be acceptable on some level to his audience, whether the scene is indicative of a social reality, or indicative of how household politics were understood to work in ancient Greece.

isn't beauty but virtue that gives pleasure to one's consort... You are a rich woman living among the poor; you think your father Menelaus is a greater man than Achilles. That's why your husband hates you.

(213) For a woman must love her husband, even when she has been married to an insignificant man, and not provoke a contest of pride. If you had had a tyrant in frozen Thrace for a husband, where one man shares many women and sleeps with each in turn, would you have murdered the other wives? Then you would have been exposed as bringing on all women your lust for bed. Your behaviour is disgusting.<sup>412</sup>

The second example from Euripides is also a speech by a woman, but one that presents a rather different view from that of Andromache about the patriarchal social system in which Greek women live (although the recognition that such a patriarchy exists, to the disadvantage of some, is the same). According to Lefkowitz and Fant, this episode from a debate in a lost tragedy was often quoted out of context in ancient biographies of Euripides in order "to counter allegations of misogyny based on out-of-context quotations from his other dramas":

Men's criticism of women is worthless twanging of a bowstring and evil talk. Women are better than men, as I will show. [*Five fragmentary lines*] Women run households and protect within their homes what has been carried across the sea, and without a woman no home is clean or prosperous....

Why is it then, that women must have a bad reputation? Won't men's worthless criticism stop, and men who insist on blaming all women alike, if one woman turns out to be evil? Let me make the following distinctions. There is nothing worse than a bad woman, and nothing better in any way than a good one, but their natures differ.<sup>413</sup>

We cannot presume from these examples that the patriarchal ideology of ancient Greece was wholly supported and endorsed by all men. At least some members of the population recognized the disparity between male and female social roles, and understood some of the implications of such a discrepancy for the "inferior" members of the population. Yet the fact that male writers recognized this social reality, went to some pains to capture in oral poetry and written literature the emotional and physical ramifications of such a system (even making narratological use of it as a plot device), but then presented carefully reasoned arguments for the

<sup>412</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, Euripides, *Andromache* 205-27; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 11-12.

<sup>413</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, Euripides, *Melanippe Captive*, Fr. 13 GLP = Fr. 499 Nauck. G; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 14.

necessity of such a system (citing a woman's naturally inferior character, or supporting a natural division of labour and social roles based on inherent character strengths and weaknesses in both men and women), arguably makes their excuses for the rigid social structure seem more of a betrayal at the same time that it makes their insights more profound. Aristotle, for example, would argue that men and women had different social roles because their relative natures made them inherently more capable of performing certain tasks. Thus, "A husband and father rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the older and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature."<sup>414</sup> Likewise, though both men and women display courage, the nature of a man's courage differs from that of a woman: "the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying."<sup>415</sup> A man therefore has as much a duty to display the right kind of courage as does a woman, and is in as much danger of jeopardizing his reputation should he fail to do so: "For a man would be thought a coward if he had no more courage than a courageous woman, and a woman would be thought loquacious if she imposed no more restraints on her conversation than the good man." This line of argument justifies the role that each plays in the home—"indeed their part in the management of the household is different, for the duty of the one is to acquire, and of the other to preserve"<sup>416</sup>—which in turn justifies the argument that a man's place is outside the home (i.e., "acquiring") while a woman should remain inside the home (i.e., "preserving").<sup>417</sup> Women are naturally more susceptible to "effects of passion on reason, judgment, and accordingly on action. Both men and women can be victims of passion, but women are portrayed as being more readily susceptible to the effects of passion (even) than men, and thus inevitably are considered to be

<sup>414</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259a37-b17; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 38.

<sup>415</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1260a9-24; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 39.

<sup>416</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b18-25; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 40-41.

<sup>417</sup> Cf. Isomachus' speech about "training a wife" in Xenophon's *On Household Management [Oeconomicus]*, which illustrates similar logic based on the respective "natures" of men and women being best suited for different work, and therefore different social roles.

potentially more dangerous.”<sup>418</sup>—This view serves to underscore the social need for women to obey men—not simply for their own good, but for the good of Greece.

Plato’s *Laws* demonstrates a similar perspective. The text seems to advocate for laws that more directly apply to women as well as men, not to ensure that the rights of women are protected as much as to protect society in general from lawless women:

...half the human race – the female sex, the half which in any case is inclined to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness – has been left to its own devices because of the misguided indulgence of the legislator. Because you neglected this sex, you gradually lost control of a great many things which would be in a far better state today if they had been regulated by law. You see, leaving women to do what they like is not just to lose half the battle (as it may seem): a woman’s natural potential for virtue is inferior to a man’s, so she’s proportionately a greater danger, perhaps even twice as great. So the happiness of the state will be better served if we reconsider the point and put things right, by providing that all our arrangements apply to men and women alike.<sup>419</sup>

While we may not be able to attribute these particular views to Plato himself, or to the ancient Greek male population as a whole on the basis of this excerpt (although it likely reflects an argument that, if not commonly in use, had familiar overtones, even if packaged in a satirical wrapping), we can perhaps glean from this that in practice the laws for men and women differed in key respects. Plato later suggests a similarly equal approach to education, for similar reasons. A woman should not be educated for her own good. Rather, a woman who is educated in the same manner as a man is economically more valuable to society than an uneducated woman:

... there are pretty well countless numbers of women, generally called Sarmatians, round the Black Sea, who not only ride horses but use the bow and other weapons. There, men and women have an equal duty to cultivate these skills, so cultivate them equally they do.... I maintain that if these results can be achieved, the state of affairs in our corner of Greece, where men and women do not have a common purpose and do not throw all their energies into the same activities, is absolutely stupid. Almost every state, under present conditions, is only half a state, and develops only half its potentialities, whereas with the same cost and effort, it could double its achievement.<sup>420</sup>

<sup>418</sup> Lefkowitz 1986, 113.

<sup>419</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 6.780e-781d, in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 47.

<sup>420</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 7.804e-806c; in Lefkowitz and Fant 2005, 47-48.

The irony of Plato's suggestion is that at the time he was writing, the Greek economy had depended for centuries on the work that women performed in the home—wool-working, child-rearing and other domestic labour. If women “threw all their energies into the same activities” as men, the Greek economy likely would have collapsed. For men to be men in ancient Greece—that is, for men to continue to fulfill the roles of epic hero, statesman, poet, philosopher, protector, acquirer of household wealth and *kleos*—they needed women to clothe, feed and manage their households and raise their children. Arguably, while Greek patriarchal ideology bestowed an inferior social status upon women, it was also *sustained* by it: the maintenance of the Greek social framework depended on the lesser social status of women and their obedience to men, as well as women's integral role in the home and on women themselves “buying in” to this model and helping to preserve it.

### **Weaving in ancient Greece**

Key to an ethnography of the *Odyssey* is the importance of weaving and weaving-related activities in ancient Greece. Images of weaving and spinning, both as physical actions and as metaphors for both mundane and exceptional events, are so embedded throughout the epic that it is relatively easy to argue that weaving (physically and metaphorically) is one of Homer's primary themes. In the ancient world, weaving and the production of textiles—necessary for the subsistence of almost all ancient societies—was primarily the domain of women. This fact, coupled with the suitability of weaving as a mode of signification (that is, as both a process and a product particularly apt for expressing meaning symbolically that either cannot be expressed aloud or is more meaningfully expressed in metaphor), made weaving a powerful communicative tool, particularly for those with little social power or who wished to express ideas that were more safely expressed in a clandestine or ambiguous manner. In communities such as archaic Greece, where women did not wield social or political power comparable to that of their male counterparts, did not command similar authority, and generally did not have similar opportunities to voice

their opinions in the public sphere, the act of weaving and the production of textiles offered a forum for the expression of ideas, convictions, desires, and resistance within what was generally a fairly rigidly patriarchal social system.<sup>421</sup> In ancient Greece, weaving enabled the weaver to “voice” a narrative, or deliver a message (or, by committing the action of weaving, allude to her power to do so) with a greater degree of autonomy and creativity—and a greater means to reach a wider audience—than she might otherwise have had.

In some ways, we can understand the textile as the ancient ancestor of the written text (our own term “text” being derived from the Latin *texere*, meaning “to construct” or “to weave”), with the power to convey meaning to its audience in much the same way that a text conveys meaning to its reader.<sup>422</sup> And while scholars have pointed out that the end product of weaving—that is, the textile—can be meaningfully compared to the text of a written page, the *act* of weaving is in many ways analogous to the composition of oral poetry, which has no tactile end-product but is “woven” extemporaneously by the oral poet, using a range of poetic elements stored in his memory.<sup>423</sup> (The weaving metaphor is not solely the domain of the

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<sup>421</sup> While weaving is most frequently associated with women in the ancient world, it is not always wholly a woman’s domain, either as a physical activity or as a metaphor for other action. In various ancient societies, men wove textiles. See, for example, Elizabeth Wayland Barber’s (1994, 259-61) discussion of Egyptian male weavers. In the *Odyssey*, both women and men “weave” plans or spin “webs” of deceit, and the ancient Greek poet story-teller—frequently male—“weaves” the threads of his narrative together.

<sup>422</sup> Even today textiles act as metaphorical representations of cultural meaning, endowing the creator or user with the power to make a social statement without making a verbal or written one. A necktie marks the businessman, a wedding dress the bride; the team jersey enables players to distinguish friend from foe, serving a function similar to that of the private-school uniform; an observant Jew’s *kittel* lends solemnity to religious occasions. In Rome (and elsewhere throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages), colour, too, conveyed social information: purple, for example, was generally used only by the social elite, the manufacture of the dye being a time-consuming and expensive process.

<sup>423</sup> See, for example, discussions throughout Scheid and Svenbro (1996), Rosati (1999), and Kruger (2001). In her studies of Homer’s Helen and Penelope, and of Ovid’s Arachne and Philomela, Kruger argues that how weaving is presented in each work is indicative of the poet’s environment. The presentation of weaving in the *Odyssey*, with its focus on the act of weaving rather than the end product, reflects Homer’s highly oral-traditional environment and the corresponding importance of the live performance. The presentation of weaving in *The Metamorphoses* focuses more closely on the end product, that is, the *information* in the textiles woven by Arachne and Philomela rather than the women’s actions. This emphasis, argues Kruger, reflects the stronger written traditions that make up Ovid’s environment:

The difference between the weaving of Arachne and Philomela and that of Helen and Penelope constitutes a distinction between the oral and written word .... for Helen and Penelope, process is of primary concern: Their texts imitate the manner of oral poetry, where

poet, however. Today we might think of an historian as weaving individual and public histories into a cohesive whole, the rhetorician as weaving diverse points into a logical argument,<sup>424</sup> the politician as devising solutions to knotty political problems by weaving compromise amongst members of the state.<sup>425</sup> In this capacity, each weaver is in essence a “creator” of something new from a number of discrete elements and, conversely, anyone who creates something new from discrete parts can be likened metaphorically to the weaver who weaves the threads of the woof onto those of the warp, joining separate elements into a single, greater (and more complex) whole.

Weaving and activities associated with weaving were integral to ancient daily life in a way that is difficult to imagine today. Creating a simple woollen tunic required shearing the wool from the sheep; washing the wool (a hot, physically taxing and smelly business), often with sweet-smelling agents to reduce the musky odour (agents that also had to be sourced); carding the wool to ensure that no foreign objects remained and the wool was free of knots; dyeing the wool (with dyes that also had to be made) by boiling it, again, with the colour (also a physically demanding job); spinning the wool into yarn—by hand, or with hand tools such as a spindle or wheel; and weaving the wool into cloth (a process that required first setting the warp

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significance (signification) lies not in product (textile) but in the flow of the story's language, in the whirl of the shuttle, or tongue, thrown across the story's warp or plot .... the weaving of Helen and Penelope exists in the service of a larger text, the epic (oral) poem .... Conversely, with its emphasis on product, the stories of Arachne and Philomela represent a culture rooted more deeply in the written tradition, reflecting the storyteller Ovid rather than the story-teller, Homer. (83-84)

This understanding of the oral/literate application of the weaving metaphor is strengthened by the fact that “[t]he only clear reference to writing in Homer” is in the *Iliad* (6.155-97): Proteus, King of Argos, sends orders for Bellerophon's death *written on tablets* to the King of Lycia (Marquardt 1993, 154).

<sup>424</sup> For example, Scheid and Svenbro (143-45) suggest that Cicero (along with other Roman writers), in his desire to see Roman society infused with the best of Greek culture and custom, wove ideas from ancient Greece with ideas of Rome to create one seamless Roman culture: “[It] was the triumphant acculturation of the Romans that partly explains the encroachment of the metaphor of linguistic and poetic weaving from Cicero's period on (if not earlier). For the metaphor of weaving becomes especially pertinent to someone who is engaged in transposing an entire culture into a new milieu” (144).

<sup>425</sup> In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), Lysistratus justifies his “political ... plan ... to correct the muddled affairs of the Athenian empire” with a weaving metaphor: “As we do our thread: when it is tangled, we take it and raise it with our spindles here and there. In the same way we would dissolve this war, if we have our way, untangling the threads by means of ambassadors sent here and there” (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 565-70, discussed in Scheid and Svenbro, 15).

[vertical] threads onto the loom—often a two-person job—and then weaving the weft or woof [horizontal] threads by passing the shuttle through the loom). If the cloth was patterned, many shuttles, each wound with threads of different colours, would be woven separately through the warp. Once a piece of cloth was large enough, it could be used to make the article of clothing. Needless to say, dressing a household demanded a considerable amount of energy and time.

In the ancient world, where the majority of textile production was undertaken by women, the process and products of wool-working (carding, spinning, weaving, the loom, and the distaff) were often seen as symbols of femininity—that is, as symbols of the qualities considered “feminine” in the culture in question. Thus, in ancient Greece, where women were valued most highly for their obedience, their fidelity, their modesty, their industriousness, their diligence in fulfilling filial duty, and their ability to manage a household, women are often depicted in art and literature at their looms, or with distaff in hand, their actions as wool-workers indicative of these feminine virtues. Attic vases, for example, frequently depicted women holding spindles, “which were confused or interchangeable in these portraits with hand-held mirrors,”<sup>426</sup> both traditional representations of femininity. Kruger points out that in many examples, the female body is distinctly sexualized; in this way the loom and distaff become symbolic not only of women’s beauty and charm, but also of a women’s desirability as a sexual object and of her own sexual appetites.<sup>427</sup> So, too, in Homeric epic, where the value of the female character is “judged predominantly by the loyalty she demonstrates to both her natal household and later to her husband and his household ... [h]er daily completion of household tasks, her beauty and physical, as well as verbal, demonstrations of modesty are all indicators of her worth.”<sup>428</sup>

Yet the symbolic power of weaving also lends itself to the subversion of the traditional representations of feminine virtue, especially when the symbol (weaving) is separated from its original context (that is, in ancient Greece, a virtuous woman). For example, if a woman dedicates her energy to managing and preserving her

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<sup>426</sup> Kruger 2001, 151.

<sup>427</sup> Kruger 2001, 53.

<sup>428</sup> Jamin 2001, 1.

husband's household and demonstrates modesty and graciousness, then her loom and her weaving serve as symbolic punctuation on her femininity and virtue. Arguably, Homer's Penelope can be interpreted in this light, her weaving of Laertes' shroud (even her unraveling of the shroud) symbolic of her modesty, her domestic cleverness, and her fidelity to Odysseus and his household. But when a female character displays traits clearly not associated with (or even in direct opposition to) the traditional virtuous feminine characteristics discussed above, and yet she is *also* depicted as weaving or spinning, then the symbolic meaning of weaving also changes: where weaving in some contexts is an indication of virtue, it can also indicate the "opposite" of virtue. Thus, when we see the goddess Kalypso "singing inside the cave with a sweet voice as she went up and down the loom and wove with a golden shuttle,"<sup>429</sup> we do not recognize her actions as positive symbols of domesticity and feminine grace, but as symbolic of her imprisonment of Odysseus against his will.<sup>430</sup> Here, then, we see weaving used not to suggest feminine virtue but rather the *subversion* of feminine virtue—the dangerous, deceptive streak in a woman's character that makes her a weak slave to her passions, her "bitch's mind" and her "thieving heart." When Odysseus's men first make the acquaintance of Circe, "the goddess with the glorious hair,"<sup>431</sup> she, too, sings "in a sweet voice / as she went up and down a great design on a loom, immortal / such as goddesses have, delicate and lovely and glorious / their work."<sup>432</sup> Homer's audience is well trained by now, however, and recognizes the two-sided nature of the weaving metaphor. Circe's weaving here is an inversion of the traditional symbol of femininity, and suggests the witch's treachery and deception. Just as her weaving is not what it seems—that is, the innocent labour of a virtuous woman—so too are her actions not transparent: she is an enchantress who transforms reasonable men into animals with

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<sup>429</sup> *O.* 5.61-62.

<sup>430</sup> "By nights he would lie beside her, of necessity, / in the hollow caverns, against his will, by one who is willing, / but all the days he would sit upon the rocks, at the seaside, / breaking his heart in tears and lamentation and sorrow / as weeping tears he looked out over the barren water" (*O.* 5.154-68). The skeptical reader might wonder if Odysseus's nights are really so unbearable; after all, the nymph was once "pleasing to him" (153-54). But whether or not Homer uses a veiled irony here with regards to Odysseus's true feelings in the matter, Kalypso's desires are very clear and are not representative of the traditional chaste and modest woman of the loom.

<sup>431</sup> Hair, too, is symbolic of feminine grace and beauty.

<sup>432</sup> *O.* 10.220-24.

no reason of their own. Once weaving has been established as a metaphor not only for virtue but also for deceit,<sup>433</sup> weaving and weaving imagery can be divorced entirely from their traditional context (the virtuous woman), and applied to characters and actions in order to attribute to them elements of feminine deceit. Thus, for example, the *Odyssey* is populated with characters who “weave deception,” “wiles” and “webs,” who “fabricate evils” or who “spin destinies.”<sup>434</sup> If weaving and weaving imagery are symbolic not only of virtue but also of deception, duplicity and entrapment, then Penelope can no longer be interpreted as purely virtuous, and Homer’s use of the weaving metaphor is also duplicitous: by depicting Penelope as weaving Laertes’ shroud in her bedchamber, for example, the poet at once suggests both her virtuous fidelity to Odysseus and the deception she weaves for the suitors. Yet because Penelope (and Homer) weaves deception so cleverly, it would be folly to assume that we, as the audience, see through all of her deceptions. We are never privy to her thoughts, and her actions seem frequently to contradict her words.<sup>435</sup> How then, can we be sure what is deception and what is real?

Maria Pantelia (1993) suggests that there is a distinct symbolic difference in the *kinds* of wool-working depicted in the *Odyssey*. Where women are in a position of

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<sup>433</sup> Just as the material woven on a loom has a “right side” and a “wrong side.”

<sup>434</sup> In Greek mythology the actions of the three Fates, or the *Moirai*, bookend human life: young Clotho spins the thread of life, older sister Lachesis measures it, and eldest sister Atropos snips the thread, thereby determining the time of a man’s death. Thus, in Greek society, while men traditionally wield the primary political and social power, there is a long literary tradition that links the mystical, unknowable realms of death and destiny with women. Homer refers to the destiny of Odysseus as having been “spun” for him from birth by the “heavy[-handed] Spinners” (*O.* 7.196-98).

<sup>435</sup> For example, she frequently laments the “death” of Odysseus but then commits actions as if he were alive. Winkler (1990) sees these “confident assertions in the face of ambiguity” as one of the particular “strategies of deception” used in the *Odyssey*: “Uncertainty typifies the mental states of characters in the early books—is Odysseus alive or dead, should Penelope remarry and if so by what procedure, are the suitors paying appropriate court to Penelope? The questions are interdependent and insoluble, but this does not prevent characters from articulating positions which sound like statements of fact but whose actual meaning in context is somewhat less dogmatic.” Similar to du Boulay’s (1974) findings in her ethnography of a modern rural Greek village, Winkler understands that “when [the Odyssean characters] make such assertions they are often jostling for position, extending their area of confidence a bit farther than the facts warrant” and that this is a calculated, strategic move. Thus, when Penelope despairs of ever seeing Odysseus alive, we cannot take her statement at face value, for it is designed on some level to deceive (137-38). Winkler cautions against a reading of Penelope that does not recognize her ability to deceive with her words just as deftly as she “weaves her wiles”: “It is common for critics to misread [Penelope’s] expressions of despair as simple statements of fact. The disharmony between her despair and her efforts at strategic planning then gets read as a split in her consciousness” (138 fn). Such a reading does not do justice to the complexity of Penelope’s character or, by extension, the instrumental role she plays in Odysseus’s return.

having to preserve or protect domestic order, they weave; when the threat to domestic order abates, they spin.<sup>436</sup> Thus, Penelope's weaving of Laertes' shroud reflects her determination to protect the patrilineal order of Odysseus's family; when Telemachus returns to Ithaca ready to take on the role of man of the house, Penelope no longer weaves but instead "[turns] fine yarn on a distaff"<sup>437</sup>—arguably the less creative and less mentally taxing of the two activities. A little later, Odysseus himself makes reference to Penelope's spinning, not her weaving: "You maids of Odysseus, whose master has long been absent, / go back into the house where the respected queen is, / and in her presence turn your distaffs, and sit beside her / in the halls, and comfort her, or comb your wool in your hands there."<sup>438</sup> Observes Pantelia: "The poet seems to suggest by this that with Odysseus' return, Penelope—although she does not yet know it—no longer needs to worry about the preservation of order at Ithaca. The replacement of her weaving with spinning symbolizes the renewal of her marital stability and the transfer of power and responsibility from her hands back to Odysseus'."<sup>439</sup> Using Pantelia's interpretation, we can understand weaving as symbolic of how a woman who maintains domestic order amidst threat or chaos must create order from disorder—or weave together discrete elements in order to achieve something new and whole. The success and maintenance of order may very well require deception; just as the individual threads intrinsic in a piece of woven fabric are concealed by the finished product, so too are the individual strategies and deceptions necessary to create and preserve domestic stability veiled by the very order these wives help to maintain.<sup>440</sup> The complete picture is visible only from a certain objective distance. Why does Penelope weave and unravel? Why

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<sup>436</sup> In addition to Penelope's weaving of Laertes' shroud, Pantelia gives several examples: "Helen weaves while a war is being fought for her sake and is interrupted at the moment when her future is apparently about to be determined by the duel between her two husbands. Andromache weaves while Hector is fighting, and her work is interrupted by the news of his death .... Calypso weaves at the very moment when Hermes' arrival shatters her hope that Odysseus will stay with her forever. And Circe weaves when Odysseus first comes to her house. Like Calypso, she will fail to entice him to stay with her .... there is no doubt that all five women, mortal or immortal, see their weaving as an escape from a state of domestic disorder" (Pantelia 1993, 498-99).

<sup>437</sup> *O.* 17.97.

<sup>438</sup> *O.* 18.313-16.

<sup>439</sup> Pantelia 1993, 497.

<sup>440</sup> *Cf.* Levaniouk (2008), who suggests that Penelope's deceptive tactics are indicative of her understanding that "sometimes flexibility and variation are a requirement of continuity." Her weaving and unweaving of Laertes' shroud, for example, is intended to preserve Telemachus' inheritance (19).

does she send encouraging messages to all the suitors? At what point does she recognize Odysseus? The answers to these questions are not clear, yet this is the very point: above all it is Penelope's ambiguity and indecision that help to achieve and maintain domestic order at Ithaca, and ultimately we cannot be sure that they are not both elaborate deceptions woven by Penelope in order to do just that.

*Weaving as a tool of power and resistance*

The weaving industry was of profound economic importance in ancient Greece. Textiles were in constant demand, and weaving centres became industrial trading hubs. Those who controlled the textile trade became wealthy, influential figures in the ancient world. The steady market for textiles and the economic and political power structures the textile market supported led to an increased demand for textile producers. This in turn led to subjugation, as "women as well as men were turned into loom slaves, working under harrowing conditions for twenty hours at a time."<sup>441</sup> Here, then, we have all the ingredients and circumstances that invite an exploration of what James Scott calls "everyday resistance": a dominant population, a subjugated population, and a daily activity performed primarily by members of the subjugated population—an activity the mechanics of which hold little interest to the dominant population, whose symbolic associations render it an activity to be performed only by certain members of society, or an activity which is otherwise mysterious or unknowable to certain segments of the population. Weaving, an everyday social and economic necessity for the dominant population of ancient Greece (that is, Greek men), was primarily the productive domain of the subjugated population (that is, Greek women) and thus potentially an ideal site for what Scott calls "hidden transcripts" of resistance.

Scholars disagree on how much power we can attribute to ancient Greek women based on their use of weaving as a tool of resistance to patriarchal ideology and rigid social structures. Winkler argues that once we begin to read the *Odyssey* as a "story about Mediterranean social practices," then we cannot fail to recognize that Homer has given Penelope a remarkable amount of power within the confines of the

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<sup>441</sup> Kruger 2001, 13.

narrative: the plot hinges on whether or not she chooses to hold out and wait for Odysseus or capitulate to the pressure of the suitors and marry, both of which, arguably, she is within her rights to do—as Odysseus’s wife, to await his homecoming and preserve the stability of his household, and as Odysseus’s widow, to take another husband. This reading depends on an interpretation buoyed by modern feminist criticism, which, Winkler suggests, is “learning to see the resourcefulness of women in cultures where they had hitherto been reported to be passive victims of male manipulation.”<sup>442</sup> This reading of the *Odyssey* also echoes Scott’s view that a subjugated population inevitably finds some way to express resistance, whether in the form of open rebellion or in subtle action or hidden, “offstage” expression to one’s peers. According to Winkler, if we do not recognize Penelope as a powerful agent of her own destiny (and the destiny of others), then we risk being “misled by [her] expressions of helplessness.” We gain a clearer insight into Penelope’s character, and into Homer’s understanding of the potential for female social and political strategy, if we seriously examine “the power and intelligence [that] are hers,” even given the limited environment in which she operates, for “Penelope is our first token of the shrewd and effective activity of Greek women, laboring (to be sure) under great constraints—activity which is deliberately and programmatically underrated in most statements and portrayals by ancient men and consequently by modern scholarship.”<sup>443</sup>

K.R. Walters (2003) poses the problem in another way: “the question of women’s power in classical Athens for all practical purposes turns out to be the question of whether women had the power to influence men to a course of action or to achieve an objective in the male world of public life.”<sup>444</sup> Though Walters frames the issue with regards to the classical world, the question is pertinent as well to Homer’s Greece. What practical influence, if any, did women have in the archaic male world? Her answer is deflating: “We simply don’t know enough, if anything at all, about the private and domestic world of Athenian women to say anything meaningful about

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<sup>442</sup> Winkler 1990, 130.

<sup>443</sup> Winkler 1990, 143.

<sup>444</sup> Walters 2003, 194.

women's power in that realm."<sup>445</sup> Yet, she suggests, we *can* gain insight into how *men* thought of the potential expression of female power in the male world, however much men may have portrayed women as their intellectual inferior and as politically and socially powerless.<sup>446</sup>

Mary Lefkowitz (1986) proposes that though women may exercise a significant if limited ability to influence outcomes, they "take political action only under certain closely defined conditions, and that unless they do so at least ostensibly on behalf of a male relative they and others around them come to a bad end."<sup>447</sup> Arguably, women did not seek political or social power for themselves, but to enhance or preserve the political or social power of their husbands and sons.<sup>448</sup> Thus, Walters' abstract query as to "whether women had the power to influence men to a course of action" is not as pertinent, according to Lefkowitz, as whether or not the social circumstances rendered it safe and politically practical for women to exercise what power they had.

Kruger (2001) contends that it is the very act of self-expression that enables a woman to exert political and social power—indeed, self-expression itself is ultimately an exertion of power. Once a woman expresses herself, those around her

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<sup>445</sup> Walters 2003, 194-95.

<sup>446</sup> Although, as Walters reminds us, the materials we have to hand are almost all carefully constructed, male-authored texts, many of which are fragmentary, and all of which (inevitably) are separated socially, geographically and temporally from their cultural context: we are therefore doomed to "read a lot into a small amount of evidence" (Walters 2003, 195).

<sup>447</sup> Lefkowitz 1986, 81.

<sup>448</sup> Lefkowitz (1986) contends that the women of ancient epic offer only passive resistance to patriarchal ideology, and do so only in the interests of male family members:

Like other women in epic and drama, Antigone wins praise for acting on behalf of her family; Penelope deceives the suitors (and so holds out for her husband Odysseus) for three years before she is discovered unravelling her weaving at night; Andromache defies Hermione and Menelaus in order to protect her young son; Iphigenia tricks the wicked king in order to save her brother Orestes; Helen tells lies to rescue Menelaus. It is important to note that in all these cases the women offer only passive resistance. Apparently acts of treachery are acceptable in a woman only if they are non-violent and are undertaken on behalf of a male relative. (84)

It is difficult to argue against her presentation, but here we can use James Scott's interpretation of resistance to help flesh out the picture of Greek women's political "passivity." "Everyday resistance," suggests Scott, is often what today we would call a passive form of resistance—or perhaps a passive-aggressive resistance. Yet this in no way negates its potency or its potential to galvanize support for a cause or lead to action. Thus, if the women of ancient literature offer "only passive resistance," it is only our modern view of "passive resistance" that justifies the modifier "only." Certainly Homer viewed the sort of "passive resistance" displayed by Penelope in the *Odyssey* to be potentially very powerful indeed.

must respond to her expression, and this in turn leads to changes in the course of action. Kruger is particularly interested in literary scenes in which “weaving becomes, in the hands of women, a tool for signifying.” In a society where women have little opportunity to voice their opinions or concerns in a public forum, and rarely record their thoughts and feelings in written form, “their textiles represent a text inscribed with a personal and/or political message.” Thus, suggests Kruger, a weaver may use the weaving process and her textile to uphold dominant patriarchal ideology if that is what she supports, but “if she is not a confederate of the dominant culture her textile will unmask these signs [of a patriarchal society] and represent them as marks of tyranny.”<sup>449</sup> In this way, a supposedly innocent and virtuous activity such as domestic textile production becomes a potent tool of personal and political expression<sup>450</sup>—and potentially a tool for political resistance to dominant patriarchal ideology.<sup>451</sup>

It is not difficult to see the connection between weaving and creative power: one who weaves takes (minimally) two discrete elements that are of limited use in and of

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<sup>449</sup> Kruger 2001, 23.

<sup>450</sup> Kruger 2001, 13.

<sup>451</sup> Ultimately, Kruger admits, even Penelope’s weaving “cannot change patriarchal society or her place in it. Weaving as process can only negotiate for her a space, and time, until she can be properly re-accommodated into this society as Odysseus’s wife” (2001, 57). I find this turn in Kruger’s argument disappointing, as it seems to negate her earlier contention about the significance of self-expression as a tool of resistance in a world where self-expression is not necessarily easy or even possible. Kruger’s statement here seems to suggest that the best Penelope can hope for is to hang on until Odysseus returns, at which point she can relax and he can take over once more. But this view does not consider the possibility that Penelope’s aim all along has been to retain her autonomy while she orchestrates circumstances so that her husband—a man whom she is both in love with and irritated by—can resume his position when he returns, without getting himself killed in the process, a not unlikely prospect. If we read Penelope in this way, then her skill in manipulating the potentially destructive yet powerful force of the male ego becomes apparent. She pits the suitors against each other by leading them all on (*O.* 2.83-110). She embarrasses Telemachus in front of the other suitors, ensuring that he forcefully asserts his status as the master of the house in public (at her expense), in front of both his suitors and his disguised father (*O.* 21.343-53). (Is this also Penelope’s way of demonstrating to Odysseus her formidable capabilities as a single parent—i.e., as the next master of the household, Telemachus seems not to have suffered at all from the absence of a father—and her personal warning to Odysseus that though she has preserved his position as master of the house, it is conditional upon him satisfying not only his wife but also their son? At this point, I wouldn’t put it past her.) If we read Penelope as suspecting the true identity of the beggar prior to the official recognition scene in Book 23, she elicits from him what for her constitutes an admission of identity by introducing the contest of the bow (the beggar tells her to go ahead with the contest, assuring her that Odysseus will be there in time—a fact he could not know unless he was himself Odysseus; see *O.* 19.583-87). Finally, she manipulates Odysseus into admitting his identity in Book 23 by threatening his ego with intimations of her infidelity (174-204).

themselves—that is, the warp and the woof—and by weaving them into a tight mesh creates something new, something of fundamental value in a variety of economic and social contexts. Physically, the spinners and the weavers are the creators of fabric; metaphorically, however, it is not a far stretch to liken them to the Creator, Who has the power to create not only the necessities of life but also life itself.<sup>452</sup> Thus, the Fates spin the destinies of men, the poet weaves the plots of his narratives, and, arguably, the Odyssean character weaves strategies in an (albeit limited) attempt to influence the outcome of the story. In ancient Greece, however, where the bulk of political and social authority rested on the shoulders of men, the majority of textile production was done by the women. Ironically, then, this powerful metaphor for creation is associated almost wholly with the socially “inferior” half of the species—resulting in an intriguing and provocative juxtaposition. Already women represent the mysterious creative force of childbirth; as spinners and weavers, women potentially wield, metaphorically at least, all the powers of the Fates. In the *Odyssey*, where weaving is regularly associated with narrative plot and deception, Homer seems to bestow upon various female characters a power similar to that of the poet himself: the power to manipulate the lives of others.<sup>453</sup> Thus, the women of

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<sup>452</sup> Kruger points out that while “[w]eaving has long been a metaphor for the creation of something other than cloth, whether a story, a plot, or a world,” the weaver who unravels the cloth—as Penelope does with Laertes’ shroud—also has the power to destroy. This heightens the metaphorical power of the weaver, suggesting that the weaver has the power to effect negative outcomes rather than simply to set events in motion, or to weave a record of events as they occur, as Helen does with her tapestry of the battle of Troy (2001, 23). Scheid and Svenbro (1996) underscore this perception of weaver as Creator and Destroyer with their suggestion that “the garment being woven and unraveled” by Penelope in the *Odyssey*, ostensibly Laertes’ shroud, can also be understood to signify Penelope’s wedding to one of the suitors: “By weaving, she prepares her wedding; by undoing the fabric, she delays it” (68). Kruger likens the weaving process (as opposed to the weaving product) to the creation of time itself: “while the textile is being woven, the story’s plot becomes suspended, and elements of hope and uncertainty of the story’s outcome enter the narrative, for the weaving process constitutes the site of ongoing artistic creation and not—like the textile—its completion. In the production of Penelope’s unfinished shroud or Helen’s tapestry woven as Homer weaves his poem, the weaving process becomes emblematic of timelessness, or time postponed” (2001, 57).

<sup>453</sup> Penelope is not the only woman to whom Homer gives this power. Circe and Calypso, both introduced as weaving or spinning, hold Odysseus captive for long periods of time. In the *Iliad*, Helen weaves the events that unfold on the battlefield—is it her weaving that determines the outcome of events, or is she simply a powerless reporter of history? Certainly, it is her actions that *begin* the Trojan War in the first place, leading to the events of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; in this sense she is a powerful weaver indeed. Perhaps the most obvious example of female weaving power in the *Odyssey* is that of Athena, the consummate goddess of weaving, who dresses both herself and other characters in disguise, and weaves deception in order to achieve the narrative outcome that Homer desires. Ironically, Snyder (1981) points out, in all the twenty-seven passages in the Homeric poems

the *Odyssey* wield a power that in the real world is ostensibly held by men. This tension presents us with opportunities to explore the relationship between male social authority and female power—not only as it is presented in literature, but as this literary relationship suggests aspects of the social and political environment of Homer's Greece. Despite appearances to the contrary, women wield a considerable amount of power to effect social change—from within a limited sphere, to be sure, but potentially to achieve effects *outside* this sphere. This power must be wielded in a clandestine and deceptive manner, however, as it is not supposed to exist.

I believe this is also Homer's perception, and his depiction of the weaving Penelope his conception of how a woman might express her individuality and "tailor" a rigid patriarchal social system to satisfy her personal goals. In this way, Penelope is a symbol of female resistance to male domination in ancient Greece—a resistance that takes place in such a subtle manner that it can be concealed as acquiescence to patriarchal norms, or at the very least, understood as such by the men whose real social authority would be suspect if women's actions were interpreted differently.<sup>454</sup> The cleverness of Homer's statement then, is that it can be read either way—Penelope's actions can be interpreted as wholly supportive of Odysseus and the patrilineal order of his household, or they can be interpreted as Penelope's rejection of the labels the men in her life wish to bestow upon her and the roles they wish her to play. She is not simply a grieving widow or a protective mother or a loyal wife or a devoted daughter-in-law. She is a woman who has been the autonomous ruler of a wealthy and powerful household for close to two decades,

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that include references to weaving, Athena is "the only female figure in Homer for whom ... weaving is not [also] a literal occupation" (193-94).

<sup>454</sup> Kruger does not attribute to Homer an equivalent deviousness: "In his figure of Penelope, Homer persists in the Greek view that weaving constitutes womanhood. However, Homer seems aware of the possibility that weaving can just as well represent a sinister activity when undertaken by a sinister weaver. Whereas Penelope's weaving symbolizes her chastity, her refusal to take a lover from the suitors who solicit her, Homer offers his readers another picture of Penelope and the possibility that her weaving suggests otherwise" (2001, 80-81). I would argue that the role Penelope plays in the *Odyssey* offers two such different interpretations of a woman's function in complex social situations that Homer must have constructed the character with both interpretations in mind—and thus the poet gives us much more than "the possibility that her weaving suggests otherwise." Thus, when Kruger tells us that "By weaving and then unraveling what has been woven, Penelope's work does not represent Homer's voice, for the very activity it suggests (the poet's voice as it composes a story) is canceled out by the opposite activity of unraveling" (82), I would argue that Penelope's unraveling is exactly representative of Homer's voice—as he unravels preconceived ideas of Greek womanhood and female power.

who now faces the intellectual and strategic challenge of retaining that power and wealth for a husband who may no longer be alive, or for a son who is not yet of an age that he can assume control of the house and protect himself from enemies who perceive him as a direct threat—and she must do so from her relatively powerless social position as a woman, without seeming to upset the natural social order or to insult the social position of the men in her life who are important to her well-being.

With the first interpretation, Homer's Penelope is the clever wife whom every man should be so lucky to have, who devotes her womanly skill and charm to protecting her husband and her family from any threats to domestic stability. With the second interpretation, however, Homer's Penelope is a woman who makes strategic choices about whom she will support and how. Seen from this angle, Odysseus is not a man with a devoted and clever wife, but rather a man who is darn lucky that his wife makes a strategic decision to support him and not her son or the other suitors, despite the fact that neither he nor Telemachus has treated her as an equal strategic partner. If we interpret Penelope's actions in this way, she becomes a potentially powerful ally and an equally formidable adversary—and Odysseus, Telemachus and the suitors become stereotypes of men who underestimate the power of an enemy and do not recognize the folly of their error. Odysseus and Telemachus are victorious not simply because they overcome their enemies, but because they were fortunate enough to have the support of a powerful ally—one whose "cleverness" is legendary but whose true social power they never fully appreciate. Homer's Penelope is symbolic not only of female social power, but the dull-wittedness of those who would discount such power. For how could the male characters in the *Odyssey* not recognize that a woman already known for her cleverness is potentially a threat to their authority after she has wielded indirect social and political control in Ithaca for nearly twenty years? By implicitly posing the question, Homer suggests that those who do not recognize the potential power of a clever woman risk the very authority on which their social and political superiority rests. Arguably, men wield power because women let them do so.

## Sêma and signification

The trick is deceptively, even duplicitously simple:  
 we must learn the lexicon that Homer and his tradition used, rather than  
 resorting to the lexicon we automatically impose when confronting a text.  
 – Foley 1996, 24

In the middle of the twentieth century, scholars argued that Greek rational thought was a direct “consequence” of Greek alphabetic literacy, and that this consequence and other “predictable” effects of literacy could be expected in any oral society whose members collectively pick up a writing utensil and begin to record their thoughts. Literacy, it was argued, changed mentality: among other things, literacy enabled abstract reasoning, which in turn opened the door for various technological, cultural and economic advances. This view of literacy as “agent of change” has shaped not only how we understand the importance of literacy in a cultural context, but also how we study oral societies and understand oral-cultural environments. While in recent decades our assumptions about the nature of literacy and its role in cultural development have been questioned and in many cases modified, the debate is ongoing. More importantly for this study, the controversy highlights “the difficulty of analysing literacy in [a society other than] our own, when our understanding of literacy tends to be instinctive.”<sup>455</sup> We tend to assume that literacy in another society is similar to the literacy we know, an assumption that is itself grounded in our “instinctive” understanding of what literacy is and how it works.

Goody and Watt (1963), followed notably by Havelock (1982 and 1986) and Ong (1982), argued that learning the Greek alphabet was relatively easy (as opposed to learning other mid-eastern scripts that either weren’t alphabetic or lacked characters for vowels). This encouraged the alphabet’s “democratic” base—that is, alphabetic literacy was reasonably accessible and useful to a wider population, unlike the specialized “scribal literacy” of the Near East, where writing systems were difficult to learn and to teach, and were thus limited to particular social, political or economic circles. According to this argument, it was the simplicity of the Greek alphabet more than any other factor that led to its widespread popularity and thus encouraged a

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<sup>455</sup> Thomas 1992, 16.

flowering of philosophical and cultural advances: “In the realm of intellectual thought, writing enabled thought to be separated from social context, and thus scepticism and analysis became possible. The cultures of the ancient Near East, with three millennia of writing, were held back by their ‘restricted literacy’ and non-alphabetic writing. Thus Greece was a blueprint for the liberating, democratizing, and intellectual effects of literacy in the Western world—and by extension anywhere which cared to introduce the alphabet.”<sup>456</sup> Though the scholars who first proposed this so-called “autonomous model” of literacy development<sup>457</sup> cautioned against viewing literacy as the sole cause of cultural change, later scholars placed enough emphasis on literacy as the defining agent of change that other potential factors were largely ignored. At the very least, “literacy” was viewed for many years as an independent, autonomous development whose consequences could be predicted and studied in isolation from their social and cultural context.

Not only has recent scholarship pointed out the importance of cultural context in the development and function of literacy in a particular environment, but recent studies have called into question the “consequences” model first inspired by Goody and Watt. Not only do we limit our understanding of ancient Greek culture if we see particular developments as “consequences” of literacy, but such a model encourages a misreading of the importance and function of oral-traditional forms of communication as well as an overemphasis on the role of an emerging literacy in early Greek history. Long after Homer’s poetry was first recorded in writing, memory remained the primary mode of preservation, and oral recitation the primary mode of transmission, of cultural information in ancient Greece. Moreover, oral-traditional forms and the role of memory shaped *how* writing would be used by the ancient Greeks and, ultimately, the role literacy would eventually play in the development of classical Greek culture. For example, though Homer’s poems were recorded in writing, they were seldom read in written form except as a tool to ensure their memorization: “the poems of Homer (or large portions of them) were learnt by heart by boys at school, and the texts owned by cultivated Athenians in the fifth

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<sup>456</sup> Thomas 1992, 17.

<sup>457</sup> See the Introduction.

century B.C. were *aide-mémoires* rather than versions to be continuously studied.”<sup>458</sup> But while recent scholarship indicates that Greek alphabetic literacy did not lead immediately to a widespread literate culture, it is equally difficult to argue that it had little or no effect on oral traditions already in place. It would be unlikely that at least some number of oral poets did not see the potential of writing as a tool to be used to their advantage. We can assume, therefore, not only that the oral culture of ancient Greece determined to some degree how an emerging literacy would function in the Greek oral-traditional environment but also that an emerging Greek literacy influenced to some extent the oral culture in which it was taking shape.<sup>459</sup> Kirk follows this line of argument to its conclusion:

It is possible, ... that some lesser use of the new technique of writing *was* the determining factor in the ability to compose such long and complex poems out of pre-existing and much shorter oral songs. Many critics, mindful of the huge gap in quality as well as quantity that separates Homer from any other purely oral singer ever known, feel that this is so. The question is difficult, and part of the difficulty is technical. *In essence* the poems belong to an oral culture, whether or not their monumental form owes something to the main poet's ability to compose with the help of writing. And to an important extent their further transmission was oral too; these were works that continued to be known, erratically and incompletely perhaps, 'by heart.' Yet, once produced, the great poems must have had a stifling effect on their shorter and simpler, more typically oral predecessors. ... The memory of earlier songs seems to

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<sup>458</sup> Kirk 1976, 2. It is important to note here that our contemporary understanding of memory and its daily applicability in modern Western culture does not resemble very closely the ancient Greek understanding of memory. Thus, discussions of the importance of memory in ancient Greece, when not accompanied by an examination of the function of memory in ancient Greece, tend to distort what was, at its core, a highly creative endeavour. Carruthers' (1998) description of memory function in medieval Europe helps deepen our insight into the potential creative role of memory in ancient Greece: "*Memoria* is most usefully thought of as a compositional art. The arts of memory are among the arts of thinking, especially involved with fostering the qualities we now revere as 'imagination' and 'creativity'" (9). Havelock (1982) describes oral poetry provocatively as the memory storage "warehouse" of the ancient Greeks. We might liken a poet's memory to a painter's canvas, brushes and paints. Without the tools of his craft, the painter cannot express himself through his art. Without the tool of his memory, and the link his memory provides him to the warehouse of myth, symbol and ritual meaning, the poet cannot recite old poetry, compose new poetry or otherwise preserve and transmit cultural information.

<sup>459</sup> Indeed, John Miles Foley (1999) points to the likelihood that not only will "oral" and "literate" characteristics be present in the same culture but they will also reside in the same person: "scholarship over the past twenty years, especially field research on living oral traditions, has taught us to distrust the false dichotomy of 'oral versus written' and to expect complex inventories and interactions of oral and literate in the same culture and even in the very same individual. Given these realities, it is sage to assume that the approach from oral tradition will continue to produce valuable insights even if we someday manage to put a stylus in Homer's hand. What matters is the nature and persistence of the traditional language as an expressive medium" (2-3).

have been all but obliterated, and one suspects that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* contributed just as much as did the rise of literate forms of poetry to the obsolescence of the old narrative tradition.<sup>460</sup>

Therefore, the “orality” of the Homeric epics—and the oral environment in which they were composed and performed—is of key importance to their interpretation. This argument holds not only for our understanding of how the poems were composed, and how they were preserved and transmitted, but also for their meaning to those who would have seen and heard them performed.<sup>461</sup> In the case of the *Odyssey*, orality refers not simply to the epic’s formulaic language, but to the poem’s underlying pattern of oral signification and the meaning of each part—diction and syntax, typical scenes, and narrative design—in the context of the whole.<sup>462</sup> The oral poet who draws on a cultural “warehouse” of descriptions, phrases, scenes and characters that may be as many as five hundred years older than

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<sup>460</sup> Kirk 1976, 2-3.

<sup>461</sup> Milman Parry first articulated his now famous Oral-Formulaic Theory in the 1930s; his colleague Albert Lord applied this theory of oral composition in his seminal *Singer of Tales* (1960). John Miles Foley (1996) offers a clear and succinct summary of the environment into which Parry first introduced his hypothesis. It is worth quoting here in order to give context. Until Parry first published his ideas, study of the Homeric poems had been dominated by the “Analysts,” who advocated a sort of “textual archaeological” approach, “staunchly supported by decades of German philology.” According to this argument, “The poems that reach the modern era ... are edited pastiches, the separate compositions of many poets joined together by a master arbiter.” Much like the proponents of the Biblical “documentary hypothesis,” the Analysts proposed that the “linguistic and narrative seams” of this master editor could still be seen, and the tasks of the literary critic was to separate out the discrete elements in the pattern. On the other side of the debate were the “Unitarians,” “more a joint reaction against the Analysts than a well conceived school of their own, who put their faith firmly in a singular genius named Homer,” the sole composer of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Milman Parry rejected both theories and argued instead that “the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the bequest of a longstanding poetic tradition, the most talented heir of which was Homer. No single person created either a poem or a part from nothingness, Parry contended; rather the epics reveal the contribution of generations of poets, transmitting and shaping through the medium of a recurrent formulaic idiom. The seemingly endless repetitions disparaged by so many (and long the bane of translators) were in effect the mark of a traditional style.” Milman’s insight that this “poetic tradition” was essentially an oral tradition rather than a written one (but one which occupied the “interface of orality and scriptuality” [Wienker-Peipho, 151]) was a “watershed moment” in folklore studies. His theory “[signaled] the start of [an] evolution toward a powerful comparative method that would be applied to scores of language areas over the next fifty years” (Foley 1996, 22). Since Parry and Lord first published their research, other scholars have suggested modifications—particularly to the “mono-model” aspect of the theory (that is, not all oral traditions in the world fit so easily into the Parry-Lord archetype), and to the theory’s overemphasis on composition (that is, audience reception of an oral tradition plays a much more significant role than Parry and Lord originally allowed). However, the Oral-Formulaic Theory continues to inform studies in oral-traditional genres today, by historians and anthropologists alike.

<sup>462</sup> On oral signification in the *Odyssey*, see especially Foley 1999, upon which much of the discussion in this section rests.

the poet himself<sup>463</sup> potentially tells his audience much more than the narrative tale he recounts: “each of these accustomed phrases, as it is dropped into the listener’s consciousness, is clustered with the heroic past, ennobled rather than staled by its archaic associations, and rich with echoes of other contexts, other heroines, other actions in other islands, under the impulse of other but still familiar gods.”<sup>464</sup> Thus, “orality is no mere incidental detail, an accident to be emphasized just for the sake of the unusual .... Within the poems [the modern reader] will be liable to miss much ... if he ignores the oral background out of which they grew.”<sup>465</sup>

In *Homer’s Traditional Art* (1999), John Miles Foley examines patterns of oral-traditional signification in Homer’s *Odyssey*. His study is based on his understanding of the “Homeric register” as a language—that is, a system of signification far too complex to be the work of a single poet. This language may be used by many, “subject of course to the limitations of talent and experience,” just as any language is ultimately only as eloquent and expressive as its user.<sup>466</sup> It will also be understood by anyone with a significant fluency in the idiom the Homeric poet employs. As a language, then, the Homeric register is far more than a “warehouse” of cultural artefacts. The repetitive, formulaic diction and structure of oral traditions tend to draw our attention away from the fact that, unlike a living, spoken vernacular, whose wide vocabulary and “broad applicability” makes it ideal for communication in contemporary contexts, “oral traditions tend to employ focused varieties of language (or registers), ... customarily [sacrificing] the broad applicability of general-purpose language in order to do fewer things well. In this respect they are usually more densely idiomatic and resonant than everyday registers.”<sup>467</sup> We might expect that in the Homeric poems one word or phrase may “resonate” with multiple meanings, drawn from historical and contemporary Greek contexts, and that the audience member who is fluent in this language will understand at least a range of these culturally specific meanings. As Sabine Wienker-Piepho (2001) clarifies, “The oral-

<sup>463</sup> “The language of Homer was never spoken by any man. It is an artificial, poetical construction containing elements both of vocabulary and of phraseology that originated at different dates over a period of at least 200 and perhaps as much as 500 years” (Kirk 1976, 4).

<sup>464</sup> Kirk 1976, 6.

<sup>465</sup> Kirk 1976, 3.

<sup>466</sup> Foley 1999, xii.

<sup>467</sup> Foley 1999, 6.

traditional background of the texts provides the ‘natural background,’ against which each individual act of the Homeric epics, however unique it may appear, takes place: in other words, the uniqueness of the instance is embedded in its traditional meaning.”<sup>468</sup>

The key to understanding the meaning of Homer’s *Odyssey*, suggests Foley, is to concentrate not only on oral-formulaic composition<sup>469</sup> but also on audience reception. The meaning embedded in an oral tradition is determined by the audience as much as it is by the poet, perhaps even more so—for when the referential advantage of traditional language is lost (that is, when the audience is no longer fluent in the cultural and idiomatic meanings layered by the poet onto individual words, phrases or scenes), then the poet must change his composition in order to get his meaning across.<sup>470</sup> When we consider Homer’s *Odyssey* from the point of view of the audience, meaning is generated on two levels: 1) the referential, which Foley calls meaning “behind the signs,” referring to idiomatic, culturally specific meaning not immediately apparent in the literal sense of the word or phrase, and 2) the situational, which Foley dubs meaning “between the signs,” referring to the “local, immediate, and individual details that are full partners in the negotiation of Homeric art.”<sup>471</sup> Between-the-signs meaning is generated by the textual, situation-specific use of the word, phrase or scene in the context of the narrative itself, though not discounting the meaning that the word or phrase or scene might have for the poetic characters in the textual situation—meaning which may itself be generated by extratextual referentiality—“behind-the-signs” meaning. A comprehensive reading of the *Odyssey* must include reading both behind and between the signs: “The art of the ... *Odyssey* stems not solely from the uniqueness of the instant nor solely from its traditional meaning, but rather from their interaction. We cannot afford to neglect either between-the-signs singularity or behind-the-signs resonance.”<sup>472</sup> By reading both behind and between the signs, Foley argues, “the essential and liberating point

<sup>468</sup> Wienker-Piepho 2001, 151.

<sup>469</sup> As did earlier twentieth-century studies of oral traditions (influenced by Parry and Lord, Goody and Watt, and others).

<sup>470</sup> Foley 1999, 6-7.

<sup>471</sup> Foley 1999, 7.

<sup>472</sup> Foley 1999, 6-7.

is that even the most singular action or event is naturally suspended within a network of implication."<sup>473</sup>

It is in part this extraordinary efficiency of the Homeric register—its use of between-the-signs singularity and behind-the-signs resonance in a compact, memorable framework—that ensured its survival, both as a performance piece and as a cultural touchstone, long after the emergence of writing. Foley suggests, however, that this sort of multilayered meaning is not unique to the Homeric tradition. In other oral-traditional cultures as well,

poetic registers have come to be seen as finely tuned instruments for the expression of their target narratives. By definition, no other medium could do as well. Furthermore, the very efficacy of the register is the best reason for continuing its use into the early stages of textuality .... Why suddenly introduce an unintelligible language into the performance arena when all parties involved are already fluent in a language so well suited to the purpose?

The answer is obvious and simple: a highly developed, mutually intelligible language is far preferable to the alternative, especially in the early stages of the new medium. To reroute the exchange from the dedicated idiom to any other tongue is to short-circuit the remarkable communicative economy of the traditional oral register.<sup>474</sup>

Elsewhere, Foley illustrates just this point with an excellent contemporary comparison. A poet, he argues, does not use repeated phrases or scenes because he has to; rather, he uses them because they signal something particular to his audience—a unique message that can be transmitted in no other way: “If ‘swift-footed Achilles’ or ‘grey-eyed Athena’ is in its own way as idiomatic as ‘once upon a time’ or ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’ then to forego its deployment is also to forego its inimitable significative power.”<sup>475</sup>

Foley approaches his analysis of the *Odyssey* using a model based on the Greek concept of *sêma*. A *sêma* (pl. *sêmata*) is a symbol or a sign. The term has wide application in ancient Greece, and is used loosely to mean something understood to stand for something else. Thus, a *sêma* could be a prophecy or an omen (such as a sign from the gods that presages the future, or the geese that symbolize the suitors

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<sup>473</sup> Foley 1999, 22.

<sup>474</sup> Foley 1999, 24.

<sup>475</sup> Foley 1996, 24.

and their impending death in Penelope's dream<sup>476</sup>), tombs or burial mounds (signaling the renown of the individual buried), Odysseus's scar (signifying his identity), the marriage bed of Odysseus and Penelope (symbolizing various things, including the end of the epic, Penelope's fidelity, and the trick Penelope plays on Odysseus to reveal his identity). Understanding the meaning of the *sêmata* depends on the audience's intimate understanding of the "immanent tradition, without which they are empty signifiers, mere parts without their implied wholes." To the ancient Greeks, then, "*sêmata* amount to signals or tokens of impending realities, realities that can be apprehended if—and only if—one knows the code."<sup>477</sup>

According to Foley, there are fifty-eight occurrences of the term *sêma* in the Homeric poems, including thirty in the *Iliad* and twenty-three in the *Odyssey*.<sup>478</sup> Perhaps most famously, the term appears three times in the *Iliad* to describe the "signs" on the tablet that Bellerophon is tricked into carrying to the Lykian king, the written orders for the hero's own death sentence.<sup>479</sup> To various scholars, says Foley, this scene proves that "writing and reading were well known to Homer and his tradition as an available and usable communications technology." But Foley argues that exactly the opposite should be understood from the use of the term in this context. We cannot "read" Bellerophon's tablet as we would a written text today; the term *sêma* in this instance is not interchangeable with our understanding of letters and words as symbols for speech. The manner in which the term *sêma* is used in the Bellerophon scene is similar, in fact, to the manner in which the term is used everywhere else, as signaling an alternative reality:

Inscribed signs are understood not as a competing or freestanding medium but as a species of *sêmata*, the established and preeminent communications technology that long precedes reading and writing. By using this idiomatic term within the register, Homer, far from affirming the participation of literacy in the process of composition (and reception), actually forces a reversal of our presumptions: whatever the nature of the scratchings on the tablet, their characterization as *sêmata* tells us that they are as redolent with traditional

<sup>476</sup> *O.* 19.535-50.

<sup>477</sup> Foley 1996, 27.

<sup>478</sup> See Foley 1999 and 1996. The remaining five occurrences are in the Hymns.

<sup>479</sup> *Il.* 6.152-90.

meaning as Zeus' omens, heroes' burial mounds, Odysseus' scar, or the olive tree bed.<sup>480</sup>

Yet even when the term *sêma* is not used at all, “we need to read all of Homer’s ‘words’—the formulas, narrative patterns, and their units of utterance—not as textual ciphers but as signals potentially rife with implication, as keys to an emergent reality.”<sup>481</sup> It is this awareness that enables us to read the character of Penelope and her everyday activity of weaving as suggestive of female social resistance within a rigid patriarchy—not necessarily as Homer’s condemnation or commendation of such resistance but simply as his reflection of it, along the lines of “This is how a woman might resist social or political pressure within the context of an ancient Greek patriarchy, and this is how that resistance may be construed as something else.” This reading is not possible, however, unless we understand the significance of weaving as *sêma*—as signifying not only Penelope’s deceptive manipulation of the suitors, but also of her manipulation of Odysseus, Telemachus, and her role as devoted wife and mother.<sup>482</sup> Importantly, for the purposes of this argument, the *sêma* of weaving is also indicative of Homer’s deft manipulation of the poetic threads of the epic as the master weaver/poet. Not only does he weave deception in the context of the narrative, but he uses the text to disguise the true intentions of Penelope—ultimately, the nature of her resistance to the role ascribed to her by her social environment and by Homer himself remains concealed beneath a complex layer of *sêmata*, all of which require the audience’s fluency in the language of traditional referentiality being used, but which contradict each other and thus enable the nature of Penelope’s resistance to remain concealed and inscrutable—and which ultimately must be interpreted even by those who are fluent in order to be understood as resistance.

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<sup>480</sup> Foley 1996, 27.

<sup>481</sup> Foley 1999, 27.

<sup>482</sup> See Hernández 2008, who argues that weaving also allows Penelope to manipulate time: “Penelope [uses] her loom to put herself in a state of complete paralysis, of stagnation, ... out of her desire to stop time.” At another level, “as long as she continues weaving and unweaving, marriage will be postponed, and Odysseus’ memory will last ... Her weaving not only stops time then, but keeps memory alive” (52-54).

*Penelope as sēma*

Penelope has traditionally been read in one of two ways by literary critics: first, as a loyal wife and mother, devoted to preserving the household of her husband and buffeted by circumstances beyond her control; and second, as an individual who wields a significant degree of power over the people around her and to some extent orchestrates the outcome of events. The primary difference between the two readings is one of agency: In the words of Walters, how much power did Penelope have “to influence men to a course of action”?

The two different readings depend to a large extent on *how much we think Penelope knows*. Does she suspect the identity of Odysseus long before the official revelation scene in Book 23? If she suspects that the beggar is Odysseus (an argument supported by John Winkler), then arguably all her actions from this point are calculated to achieve a particular outcome: “That early, spontaneous awareness of Odysseus’s identity becomes, for such critics, a key sign of female autonomy: if Penelope is acting with knowledge of what she is doing, then she has some control over her situations.”<sup>483</sup> For example, she “sets the contest, not as a means of capitulating to the suitors, but as a way of testing her suspicion and helping Odysseus on the chance that she is right.”<sup>484</sup> On the other hand, is it possible that Penelope is completely ignorant of Odysseus’s identity? Such a reading would be “founded in the absence from the text of any explicit sign of recognition, in the way everything that Penelope says is consistent with ignorance of the stranger’s identity.”<sup>485</sup> In this interpretation, Penelope is “limited by her position in a patriarchal system,” a reading that “can seem blind to what we should be particularly attuned to—the resourcefulness with which people resist their oppression by dominant power structures—and, for that reason, [can also seem] politically unappealing.”<sup>486</sup>

<sup>483</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 79.

<sup>484</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 77, citing Winkler’s argument in *The Constraints of Desire*, pp. 129-61.

<sup>485</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 77, citing her own arguments in *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (1987) and “Penelope’s *Agnōia*: Knowledge, Power and Gender in the *Odyssey*” (1987).

<sup>486</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 79. Murnaghan acknowledges that, in the era of more modern, feminist interpretations of history, this reading is not currently popular, and “may clash with the belief that systems of domination are not so monolithic and invulnerable that they cannot be challenged and subverted from within.” She suggests that this is indicative of the debate in literary studies between

In the latter reading, Penelope is an “unwitting accomplice” to Odysseus’s plan; in the former, she “knowingly cooperates in his success.”<sup>487</sup> What is most curious about these two diametrically opposed interpretations of Penelope’s agency is the fact that Homer provides material enough to justify either reading. The duplicitous Homer “[tells] two stories at once.”<sup>488</sup> Murnaghan explains:

[The two stories are] the product of two distinct critical approaches, corresponding to two agendas for contemporary feminist criticism. One is the project of identifying and describing the ways in which women are oppressed, tracking patriarchal structures and revealing their workings, showing how female characters in literature are delimited by the male-generated terms in which they are drawn .... The other approach is the project of identifying and celebrating the ways in which women resist patriarchal structures, manipulating their oppressed positions to gain what they want, claiming a voice with which to articulate their own concerns even under conditions of domination.<sup>489</sup>

But while this argument explains why we *see* two stories in the text, it does not explain why Homer would choose to *tell* two stories at once, which he undoubtedly does: the fact that neither story directly contradicts the other, and that each story is equally plausible based on the text itself, points to Homer’s significant skills in deception. The key questions for our purposes are ones that Murnaghan does not directly address in her (1994) paper: *Why* does Homer tell two stories at once? What do two stories together accomplish that one story on its own would not? It could be argued that Homer is simply demonstrating his virtuosity. But there is another possibility: Homer tells us two stories in order to present an idea in one that may not be acceptable to all or part of his audience. By presenting two stories, he effectively offers his listeners (or readers) a choice—they can believe of Penelope whatever they wish to believe, that she is an “unwitting accomplice” or a willing strategic partner. At the same time, Homer can present an unconventional or socially

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New Historicists, “who tend to see works of literature as including marginal or oppositional voices only to contain them” and other scholars, who suggest that this view draws attention away from the deliberateness with which “genuinely subversive forces do make their way into literature” (1994, 79-80).

<sup>487</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 78.

<sup>488</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 78.

<sup>489</sup> Murnaghan 1994, 78.

objectionable idea without seeming to do so—or, at least, direct attention away from the unconventional to the more conventional reading of Penelope.

If this is the case, the obvious next question is: Which Penelope is the socially acceptable Penelope, and which is the Penelope that Homer wishes to disguise? We know that in ancient Greece, virtue, fidelity and modesty are all qualities admired in women. We also know that in ancient Greece women were often portrayed as slaves to their passions, a trait that made them susceptible to temptation and encouraged their “natural” appetite for duplicity—both conditions that, according to various Greek writers, required the control of a firm male hand. We may also recall Lefkowitz’s argument that in ancient Greece women exercised a significant if limited ability to influence the outcome of events, but that they would “take political action only under certain closely defined conditions” on behalf of a male relative. Under this pretense, a woman could commit actions that would generally be considered inappropriate or unseemly, as long as their ultimate aim was to enhance or preserve the political or social power of their husbands and sons (or, at least, their *apparent* aim was to do so).<sup>490</sup> If we add to this argument the observations of Winkler, du Boulay and other anthropologists about the level of subterfuge and deception in everyday political and social machinations in contemporary rural Greece, it is conceivable that the unseemly or inappropriate actions committed by women to influence events on behalf of a male relative are likely to have included deception and subterfuge.

If we consider the *Odyssey* in this light, then, clearly Homer has no cause to conceal or otherwise disguise the ignorant and “unwitting accomplice” Penelope, for she displays the qualities considered by Greeks to be indicative of feminine virtue, even when she attempts to deceive the suitors, as she arguably uses deception in the interests of preserving the social and political position of her husband. On the other hand, Homer *does* have reason to disguise the “strategic partner” Penelope, for though she uses deception to preserve Odysseus’s power, she also deceives Odysseus himself by concealing her suspicions about his identity. Arguably, she does not use deception in this case to enhance her husband’s position, but to

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<sup>490</sup> See the quote from Lefkowitz 1986 above.

maintain her own: the longer she maintains this deception, the more likely she will be able to prove her own fidelity and force Odysseus to reveal his identity to her in a manner of her own choosing (which she eventually does through her trick with the marriage bed). Perhaps more importantly, her deception also enables her to exact her own revenge on her husband, who is at best callous and at worst misogynistic, and certainly does not display the degree of trust in Penelope that one might expect given his comments about Penelope in other parts of the *Odyssey*.<sup>491</sup> While Odysseus chides her for a “heart more stubborn than the ... rest of womankind,” telling her that “no other woman ... would keep back / as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering, / came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country,”<sup>492</sup> Penelope keeps her cool:

Circumspect Penelope said to him in answer:  
 ‘You are so strange. I am not being proud, nor indifferent  
 nor puzzled beyond need, but I know very well what you looked like  
 when you went in the ship with the sweeping oars, from Ithaka.  
 Come then, Eurykleia, and make up a firm bed for him  
 outside the well-fashioned chamber: that very bed that he himself  
 built. Put the firm bed here outside for him, and cover it  
 over with fleeces and blankets, and with shining coverlets.’  
 So she spoke to her husband, trying him out ...<sup>493</sup>

It is here that Penelope wins the game of cat and mouse. Odysseus, proving that he is in the end susceptible to his passions, is tricked by his jealousy into revealing intimate details about the marriage bed (details only he and Penelope would know) and thus also reveals his vulnerability and, ultimately, his true identity in a manner that satisfies her:

‘What you have said, dear lady, has hurt my heart deeply. What man  
 Has put my bed in another place? ....  
 ... There is one particular feature  
 in the bed’s construction. I myself, no other man, made it.  
 There was the bole of an olive tree with long leaves growing  
 strongly in the courtyard, and it was thick, like a column.

<sup>491</sup> “However much it may conflict with our admiration of the *Odyssey*, we must come to terms with the misogyny of a poem in which a husband deliberately excludes his wife from his plot to recover a position that is largely defined by their marriage, in which he allows her to help him by taking a step—setting the contest of the bow—that she believes [or so he thinks] will bring her the fate she has dreaded and attempted to resist, marriage to one of her suitors” (Murnaghan 1994, 77).

<sup>492</sup> *O.* 23.167-70.

<sup>493</sup> *O.* 23.173-81.

I laid down my chamber around this, and built it, until I  
 finished it, with close-set stones, and roofed it well over,  
 and added compacted doors, fitting close together.  
 Then I cut away the foliage of the long-leaved olive,  
 and trimmed the trunk from the roots up ...  
 making a bed post of it ...  
 There is its character, as I tell you; but I do not know now,  
 dear lady, whether my bed is still in place, or if some man  
 has cut underneath the stump of the olive, and moved it elsewhere.<sup>494</sup>

Penelope, on the other hand, does not allow her emotions to inhibit her playing the deception to the end and achieving her goals, namely, to re-establish Odysseus as her husband and master of Ithaca, and to force her husband to admit his vulnerability and reveal himself to her in the manner she wishes. In deceiving Odysseus, Penelope proves once and for all that she is as calculating a woman as Odysseus is a man. In fact, far from being the overly passionate, compulsive individual her “feminine nature” would suggest, Penelope surpasses Odysseus in reason and rationality, effectively beating him at his own game.

The likelihood that Homer’s two-story-solution serves to camouflage this strategic Penelope as opposed to the more acceptably “feminine” Penelope is also suggested on the basis of purely narratological grounds. The marriage bed scene is simply not interesting unless Penelope suspects Odysseus’s identity—a fact that becomes very clear if we imagine the dramatic scene as it would play out on stage in front of an audience rather than on the written page.<sup>495</sup> If she is completely ignorant, the scene loses all tension, and Penelope is a rather flat, one-dimensional character defined by her guileless ignorance, and arguably her stupidity, as by now the signs that Odysseus is indeed Odysseus are very difficult to ignore. But we already know that Penelope is anything but one-dimensional—certainly she is not guileless or stupid—as evidenced by her deception of the shroud and her “messages” to the suitors, as well as by other scenes and remarks by other characters. So while it is possible that Penelope is completely unsuspecting in this pivotal scene, such a Penelope would not match the Penelope that Homer has shown us previously, and such an interpretation would not do justice to the dramatic tension and witty

<sup>494</sup> *O.* 23.183-204.

<sup>495</sup> I thank Dr. Gordon Shrimpton for this simple yet inspired insight.

dialogue Homer has presented thus far. These arguments would suggest that Winkler's reading of Penelope—a Penelope who suspects the true identity of the beggar long before Odysseus officially reveals himself, a Penelope who hedges her bets in order to retain a certain amount of control over her circumstances—is the correct one, and Homer makes a profound statement about the power of women to effect social and political change. By hiding the likely (but socially unacceptable) interpretation behind the more conventional one, Homer aims to fool some of the audience, if not others (as he has fooled some scholars and not others for thousands of years). Whether or not Homer actually believes women wield a significant degree of power is secondary to his presentation: By telling two stories at once he raises the *possibility* that women wield more power than men think, and that if they do, this is one way they might wield power and yet hide from men the fact that they do so.

Penelope's character as *sêma* is also inseparable from her role as a weaver. By casting her as a weaver, Homer endows Penelope with the power of the author to create outcomes. We have discussed above the "multitextual" role of weaving and cloth in ancient societies. Cloth was time-consuming and expensive to produce, and thus became a symbolic representation of value. Its "meaning" as a product of value ensured that, "[w]hether decorating floors, walls or bodies, cloth was woven with attention to *intention*, communicating not only cultural meaning, but also bestowing (or preserving) power."<sup>496</sup> As Kruger (2001) points out, if one of a textile's primary functions in a society is to convey meaning, then distinctions between text and textile are less relevant, for both convey meaning as a primary function. Prior to the advent of writing, "cloth was one of the primary modes for transmitting ... social messages."<sup>497</sup> After the emergence of writing and the use of texts to record and preserve cultural information, cloth did not simply cease to act as a conveyor of meaning. However, because women were traditionally the primary wool-workers and weavers in ancient societies, and because writing and writing utensils were often not easily available to them, where cloth was originally one of society's primary conveyors of meaning, cloth came to be particularly associated as a mode of

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<sup>496</sup> Kruger 2001, 11.

<sup>497</sup> Kruger 2001, 12.

expression for women. Kruger makes the provocative argument that literary history must by definition include a deeper exploration of the relationship between literary text and textile, and that “[b]y recuperating a textile history and including it in our awareness of literary history, we will recover a large community of female authorship.”<sup>498</sup>

When we examine Penelope in the context of this understanding of literary history, then, it becomes impossible to separate the woman from her weaving. Ultimately, by associating her so closely with her loom, Homer casts Penelope as an author—of her own destiny and the destinies of other characters in the poem, and thus on some level, of the poem itself.<sup>499</sup> At the same time, by dressing Penelope in the clothing of the virtuous yet ignorant wife, Homer successfully disguises this perception of female social and political power from those who do not wish to entertain such possibilities.

### **Penelope’s resistance and the three principles of disguise**

Oral traditions work like languages, only more so.

– Foley 1999, 20<sup>500</sup>

For John Miles Foley, the meaning of an oral tradition is both literal and referential—that is, traditional *sēmata* (signs or symbols) have local, narratological meaning as well as extratextual cultural meaning. To understand an oral tradition in the same way that its original audience would have understood it (or to come as close to such an understanding as possible), we must read between the signs (looking for literal and local meaning within the parameters of the oral-traditional “text” itself) and behind the signs (understanding the idiomatic, extratextual meaning layered onto the *sēmata* of the text). Within the context of the *Odyssey*, Foley

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<sup>498</sup> Kruger 2001, 12, 13.

<sup>499</sup> Of course it will be argued that ultimately Homer is the only author of the poem and thus the destiny of his characters, and that Penelope’s apparent role of author is simply one more element “authored” by Homer himself. But the fact that Homer *casts* Penelope in the role of author is relevant to the study at hand, for it is, I believe, indicative of how Homer views the potential capacity of Penelope—and perhaps of women generally—to orchestrate events and author circumstances to their advantage, despite their seemingly cloistered and restricted social roles.

<sup>500</sup> And *passim*.

understands the term *sêma* to mean more than simply a sign or symbol that implies to the characters and to the audience additional or alternate realities within the bounds of the narrative itself. A *sêma* may also be any sign to the audience of alternate realities beyond the limits of the oral traditional performance. Such signs are not limited to the traditional *sêmata* in epic poetry, such as dreams or prophecies, for example. Words, phrases, typical scenes and narrative patterns may also “resonate” with meanings drawn from various other historical and contemporary Greek contexts, and thus act effectively as *sêmata*. An audience fluent in the “language” of oral-traditional *sêmata* will understand not only the meaning of the *sêmata* within the world inhabited by the characters, but also the culturally specific meaning of the *sêmata* as they refer to events or circumstances in the world inhabited by the audience.

Foley’s “*sêmata* framework” for reading the *Odyssey* with an eye to extratextual referential meaning is similar to the framework I have proposed for reading hidden transcripts of resistance into oral-traditional texts, or texts recorded in cultures that use highly referential oral registers. Foley finds extratextual meaning layered onto three types of *sêmata*—phrases, narrative patterns and typical scenes. I argue that indications of political and social resistance may be layered onto particular textual elements, and that these subversive meanings are hidden or concealed according to three principles—disguise of resistance through diction or syntax, obfuscation of resistance through narrative or textual design or structure, and the misdirection of the audience away from resistance through content detail. Where Foley finds referential meaning behind phrases or words, I find indications of resistance embedded in the diction a text uses, or the manner in which words are arranged; where Foley finds referential meaning behind story-patterns, I find that political or socially subversive ideas may be hidden within the structure of the narrative design, especially in the way that individual episodes of a text work together as a whole; where Foley finds referential cultural meaning behind a stereotyped scene (just as the “banquet scene” and the “foot-washing scene” each resonate with extratextual cultural meaning in the *Odyssey*, for example), I find that the details of a familiar, predictable, stereotyped scene (the death of a martyr, or public Torah study in the

Talmud, for example) provide the ideal cover for political or social resistance, as the audience is focused on *what it expects to see* in the stereotyped scene rather than anything else. Thus, those members of the audience not expecting to receive subversive or resistant meaning from the typical scene will not know to look for it; on the other hand, those audience members fluent in the “language” of resistance being used by the author will recognize and understand the subversive meaning embedded within the seemingly benign environment of the typical scene. Both the *sêmata* framework used by Foley and the principles of disguise model used in this study demand the audience’s familiarity with a particular oral-traditional referential environment, and a certain willingness to read extratextual meanings into the text or performance.

The similarities between Foley’s *sêmata* and the three principles of disguise are limited, of course, not least because the *sêmata* as Foley presents them are not intended by the author as purposeful disguises of subversive or hidden meanings; rather, they reflect the oral register in use within the cultural context, and the meanings associated with this oral register may serve to suggest the deeper cultural, social and political meaning of the oral tradition within the oral-traditional environment rather than to subvert social or political ideology. On the other hand, I argue that the principles of disguise are *often* used intentionally to conceal expressions of resistance that could compromise the author or his audience if they were understood by those individuals or groups who had a vested interest in ensuring that subversive meanings and intentions were not preserved or transmitted, especially in a forum as widely accessible as Homer’s *Odyssey* or, by way of comparison, the Babylonian Talmud. Thus, while Foley’s reading of *sêmata* suggests that the meaning of the *Odyssey* depends on our understanding the oral tradition’s referential language, the principles of disguise suggest that recognizing a transcript of resistance in the *Odyssey* depends on our being able to understand not only that Homer uses the referential language of the *sêmata* but also that the language of *sêmata* can be used to conceal resistance to oppression, specifically Penelope’s resistance to the role predetermined for her within the parameters of the Greek patriarchal social system.

The key to understanding how Homer uses *sēmata* to conceal Penelope's expression of resistance is in our recognizing that Homer tells two different stories about two very different versions of Penelope. Each Penelope works with her *doppelgänger* to disguise Homer's presentation of female resistance to an oppressive patriarchy. This enables Homer to present the possibility of resistance and feminine power and yet claim plausible deniability. Homer's socially acceptable, virtuously feminine Penelope serves to conceal a second Penelope, *sēma* of female deceit and subversion of patriarchal order. This duplicitous, subversive Penelope uses the *kleos* of virtuous, feminine Penelope to further her agenda of social subversion without drawing unfavourable attention—either to herself within the parameters of the epic, or to Homer.

Homer achieves this feat by presenting his audience with a double blind. He introduces a virtuous yet still deceitful Penelope at the outset, providing his audience with socially acceptable explanations for her deceptive tactics. In this way he tricks his audience into presuming we now “know” Penelope, we have “discovered” her deception—we see her faults, but we also understand that she commits her faults under virtuous pretense. While her weaving of Laertes' shroud and her flirtation with the suitors are duplicitous actions, we can accept that they are done in the name of virtue, and thus demonstrate Penelope's virtuous nature. While she displays the deceit typical of all women, it is not a malicious deceit: A deception committed on behalf of her husband and his house is forgivable. In presenting an imperfect Penelope, Homer implies that there is no further deception: the flawed yet ultimately virtuous Penelope is all there is to see. Ultimately, however, the deceptive (yet virtuous) Penelope conceals another, much more dangerously deceptive Penelope—one whose duplicity is not always in line with her husband's interests, and one who carves for herself a semblance of autonomy for seemingly no other reason than to gratify her own personal desires. Thus Homer uses a transcript of tacitly acceptable resistance to social circumstances (i.e., Penelope deceives the suitors in order to further her husband's social and political goals) to conceal what is a socially unacceptable transcript of resistance to social circumstances (i.e., Penelope deceives Odysseus in order to further her own social and political goals).

When the two versions of Penelope are viewed in this way, we can perceive how Homer's presentation works in conjunction with the three principles of disguise. Foley understands words and phrases as *sēmata*, reading extratextual, referential meaning into noun-epithets and particular combinations of words.<sup>501</sup> The first proposed principle of disguise articulated in the previous chapter is disguise of political or social resistance through diction or syntax, including word play and double entendre. Using this principle, an individual or group of people can hide one or more subversive meanings behind seemingly innocuous words or turns of phrase. Resistance to social or political ideology or, in the case of Homer, representation of such resistance, can thus be transmitted to an audience receptive to such representations at the same time that it can be denied by the author or creator if denial seems to be the prudent course of action. In the *Odyssey*, weaving signals womanly virtue as well as feminine deceit. Weaving thus serves to symbolize (among other things) both versions of Penelope: the virtuous wife who weaves cloth as one of her daily domestic activities and the clever deceiver who weaves wiles in order to preserve order in her husband's household. Yet once again Homer's deceptive-yet-virtuous Penelope hides the possibility of an even more deceptive Penelope—one who "weaves" time and events in a manner that benefits her self first, her husband and her husband's family second.

Foley sees story-pattern as *sēma*, reading extratextual, referential meaning into the *Odyssey*'s traditional narrative models.<sup>502</sup> A common story-pattern or theme in the *Odyssey* is that of deception. Penelope deceives the suitors, the suitors deceive

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<sup>501</sup> Aside from noun-epithets such as "sea-girt Ithaka" or "rosy-fingered Dawn," for example, Foley spends considerable time analyzing the symbolic, referential meaning behind the use of precisely worded phrases, such as the question: "What sort of word escaped your teeth's barrier?" According to Foley, "This query appears six times in the *Odyssey*, indexing a situation in which an older, wiser, or otherwise more authoritative person chastises another for not knowing better, for not trusting him or her. Additionally, the phrase imputes a rashness on the part of the person addressed, suggesting that something needs to be set right" (1999, 28).

<sup>502</sup> For example, Foley (1999) argues that the fact that the *Odyssey* is presented as a Return song alerts the audience to expect particular narrative elements and patterns, and to respond in a particular way to narrative cues. The *Odyssey* "resonates" within a cultural environment in which Return songs, and the characters that populate them, carry meaning within a collective body of oral tradition. On the basis of this cultural resonance, Odysseus is not simply Odysseus. Instead, the character of Odysseus is understood in relation to other heroes, and his actions are measured against theirs—just as the character of Penelope stands alongside other heroes' wives, and her actions are understood in relation to theirs.

each other, Telemachus deceives his mother, Odysseus deceives his wife, Penelope deceives her husband. This repeating structural pattern enables Homer to obfuscate the true cleverness of Penelope's subversive techniques. We *know* that Penelope uses deception—we are told how clever a deceiver she is on several occasions. We are also told that Penelope is a virtuous and loyal wife to Odysseus, using her clever “wiles” to maintain and preserve household honour and order amid chaos. Thus, as an audience, we are given a perfectly plausible, socially acceptable explanation for Penelope's deceptions: Penelope *must* use deception in order to fulfill her role as obedient, loyal and virtuous wife. At the same time, the fact that *some* of Penelope's deceptions are socially appropriate in the context of Greek society enables Homer to conceal the fact that not *all* of her deceptions are so socially acceptable. The socially acceptable deceptive Penelope hides a socially unacceptable deceptive Penelope—one whose deceptions are arguably intended to further her own agenda, not her husband's. Once we have recognized the socially subversive Penelope concealed behind the socially acceptable Penelope, then none of the character's actions can be read as purely virtuous. Penelope's lament that Odysseus is dead can no longer be understood as the genuine sorrow of a devastated wife, nor even the calculated cry of a wife who deceives the suitors and others in order to help ensure the safe return of her husband and the continued prosperity of his household. Rather, we must admit the possibility that Penelope laments the “death” of Odysseus (all the while acting in a manner that suggests she believes Odysseus is still alive) in order to better set the stage for her revenge. The more grieving and helpless she demonstrates herself to be, the less likely it is her deception will be discovered—and, indeed, her deception is successful: she tricks Odysseus into revealing himself, on her terms, at a time of her choosing, without ever admitting aloud her suspicion that Odysseus is alive.

The two versions of Penelope are also key to recognizing subversive elements in the scene of the marriage bed in Book 23, a scene that Foley would argue falls within the parameters of a typical scene *séma*, namely, the official recognition scene typical of oral traditions in which a character's disguise is finally revealed. Prior to the marriage bed scene, Penelope professes to be still unsure of Odysseus's true identity, despite the fact that Telemachus, Eurykleia and Odysseus all assure her that

the beggar is indeed her husband. She is accused by them of being “mistrustful”<sup>503</sup> and “harsh,”<sup>504</sup> of having a “hard heart”<sup>505</sup> and a “stubborn spirit.”<sup>506</sup> Odysseus alludes to her delicate femininity, suggesting that it is his appearance that turns her off: “presently she will understand better; / but now that I am dirty and wear foul clothing upon me, / she dislikes me for that, and says I am not her husband.”<sup>507</sup> But it is when he peremptorily orders the maid to make up a bed for him in his wife’s bedchamber that Penelope’s patience snaps: she orders Eurykleia to set up a “firm bed” for him *outside* her bedroom, and let it be “that very bed that he himself built.”<sup>508</sup> She knows, and she knows that he knows—if he is indeed Odysseus—that the bed is literally attached to the bed chamber, created from the trunk of an olive tree that grows up through the centre of the room. Penelope could not have moved it alone; Odysseus accuses her of moving it with the help of a lover. And with his accusation (which belies his weakness, a susceptibility to jealousy), Penelope tricks him into revealing his identity while divulging nothing revealing about herself.

Though the scene is traditionally understood as Penelope’s clever ruse to elicit Odysseus’s betrayal of himself, her reasons for tricking him are not wholly clear. By this point in the epic, the true identity of the beggar is known to all the main characters of the play: Telemachus, Eumaios, Medon, even the unfortunate suitors—none can say he was not completely sure that Odysseus was Odysseus before the end of the battle. Yet Penelope still professes uncertainty. Is she really so very stupid? By her actions throughout the play we know she can not be. Is she overly cautious? Does she use the ruse simply to ensure beyond doubt that Odysseus is who he says he is—that he isn’t, for example, “some one of mortal men [who] would come my way and deceive me / with words”?<sup>509</sup> Yet Penelope’s actions throughout the play

<sup>503</sup> O. 23.72.

<sup>504</sup> O. 23.97.

<sup>505</sup> O. 23.97.

<sup>506</sup> O. 23.100.

<sup>507</sup> O. 23.114-16.

<sup>508</sup> O. 23.178-79.

<sup>509</sup> O. 23.216-17. From this comment, it could be argued that prudent caution has been one of the key reasons Penelope has remained as faithful to Odysseus as she has throughout the poem. After Helen’s experiences, she is suitably cautious: “For neither would the daughter born to Zeus, Helen of Argos, / have lain in love with an outlander from another country, / if she had known that the warlike sons of the Achaians would bring her / home again ...” (O. 23.218-21).

have not been without risk and do not immediately suggest an overly cautious nature. Is the ruse intended to shake off any mischievous gods who would wish her ill and attempt to deceive her?<sup>510</sup> Or does she simply want revenge, to hurt her husband as he has undoubtedly hurt her, having trusted her son and her maidservant—even, arguably, the dog—with the truth of his identity long before he trusted her?

I would argue that while the ruse accomplishes all of these goals, it is more important as Homer's final punctuation on Penelope's hidden transcript of resistance. For domestic order to be restored (and for the poem to reach a conclusion), Penelope must accept Odysseus as her husband and master of the house, acceding her position as mistress in his absence. If she does not do this, his position as master of the house and ruler of Ithaka is in doubt, and the poem has no conclusion. Penelope is the only one in the epic who can re-establish domestic order: ultimately, the *telos* (fulfillment) of the poem, and the fate of Ithaka, rests in a woman's hands.

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<sup>510</sup> As she suggests happened to Helen: "It was a god who stirred her to do the shameful thing she / did, and never before had she had in her heart this terrible / wildness ..." (*O.* 23.222-24).

Chapter 3  
**Serving Up Resistance in *Castle Rackrent***

Playing dumb can be an effective weapon of the weak .... Humor can be a most engaging way to undermine the strong while denying any such purpose.  
 – Herzog 2004, 55

Serious historians ... have often undervalued fiction, if only ... because by convention history is concerned principally with the recovery of truth about the past. But for social history—for the history of culture, for the history of people's understanding of their own society—fiction occupies a privileged position.

– Hopkins 1993, 6

In previous chapters, I argued that resistance to domination may be concealed within written documents—layered onto particular textual elements—and that these subversive meanings may be disguised according to three principles. A transcript of resistance may be concealed by patterns in diction or syntax, or it may be veiled by the narrative or textual design of the written piece. Audience attention may also be directed away from a transcript of resistance through the inclusion by the author of “red herring” details in the written text. The successful disguise of social and political resistance within a written text according to these principles functions within a framework of a particular oral-cultural ideology and worldview; it is coded to be recognized by some, and not recognized by others. A successful disguise succeeds because the key to its “decoding” lies in the referential meaning embedded in the diction and syntax, the narrative structure, and the scenes employed by the author—which are recognizable to those members of the audience familiar with the oral-cultural environment being referenced and fluent in its oral-traditional “language,” but likely not decipherable to those members of the audience who are unfamiliar with the code.<sup>511</sup>

This study also argues that, far from being simply a coincidental pattern discovered long after a text's composition by a scholar keen to find evidence of

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<sup>511</sup> John Miles Foley (1999) argues that an oral tradition is “like a language, only moreso.” Just as language imbues symbols, sounds, grammatical structure and idiom with referential meaning, so too does an oral tradition attribute referential meaning to ritual, gesture, speech acts and so on. Because an oral tradition may incorporate so many more aspects than the purely linguistic, however, its potential for referential meaning may be far more complex than that of “mere” spoken language.

resistance by subverted or oppressed groups, in practice these methods of disguise may be used *intentionally* by authors to conceal expressions of resistance that could compromise the writer or his audience if their subversive meaning were understood by those with a vested interest in ensuring that such meanings were not preserved or transmitted, especially in a forum as widely accessible as, for example, Homer's *Odyssey* or the Babylonian Talmud. While intentions are difficult to prove, this study offers evidence to suggest the likelihood that the authors of the texts used in this study were not unaware of their use of oral-traditional referential meanings, the resulting duality of their message, and the probability that only some members of their audience would "get" the code. In the texts examined so far in this study,<sup>512</sup> "the message" amounts to what some members of the contemporary historical audience would have understood to be politically subversive or socially unacceptable. This suggests to me that the authors intended for such a message to remain essentially coded, comprehensible only to those who possessed the key. Those who held the (oral-traditional) code key were those most likely to agree with the subversive (oral-traditional) message embedded in the written text.

Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* presents an intriguing case. Transcripts of resistance in *Castle Rackrent* are at once easier to see and present a different sort of interpretational challenge from those in Homer's *Odyssey* and tractate Avodah Zarah. In part this challenge is due to the fact that the author is not of the oral culture she depicts, adding an additional layer of interpretive ambiguity. Where the rabbi-authors of the Talmud were themselves participants in the oral culture the Talmud recalls, and where Homer—though in all likelihood not a female weaver—was a participant in the oral culture that is the immediate environment of the *Odyssey*'s composition and performance, Maria Edgeworth is an observer of (rather than a participant in) the native-Irish, oral-traditional environment that Thady Quirk represents. Yet she cannot be called an "objective" observer: as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in eighteenth-century Ireland, her social and political status is dependent to a significant degree on the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish relationship with the native Irish, and on the Anglo-Irish role of political liaison *cum* interpreter

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<sup>512</sup> That is, tractate Avodah Zarah from the Babylonian Talmud, and Homer's *Odyssey*.

of the natives' "wild shamrock manners."<sup>513</sup> If the native Irish ceased to be an object of mystery, or became wholly assimilated into the British Empire—that is, if the native Irish were no longer Other—then arguably the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy would lose political power and have trouble justifying the "ascendancy" of its existence and the special status it enjoyed in imperial Ireland.<sup>514</sup> Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (2004) argue that Edgeworth's novels "expose the manner in which [Edgeworth's] own identity was distorted by her uneasy position as one who supported and identified Irish causes, thereby disassociating herself with the English, while maintaining her position on the estate her family took from the Irish years before."<sup>515</sup> I argue that Edgeworth disguises two transcripts here: the transcript of those members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who are sympathetic to the plight of the colonized native-Irish population and who, as avatars of modernity,<sup>516</sup> aim to reveal to the world the value of the Irish mind; and the transcript of an Anglo-Irish observer who harbours conflicting opinions about Ireland's impending Union with Great Britain yet whose political voice is circumscribed by her sex and social position. Edgeworth conceals both of these transcripts beneath the veneer of *another* hidden transcript—that of the native Irish peasant—creating a clever double-layered disguise, which masks her political opinions from an unsympathetic audience. To reveal Edgeworth's primary-level hidden transcripts, we must first unpack the secondary-level transcript of Thady Quirk.

Once more, James Scott's model offers a useful framework for examining the text. Scott allows that those who conceal a stance or perspective of resistance to a dominant group or ideology through their everyday actions may not consciously be aware that they are doing so. Following this line of argument, it is possible that an

<sup>513</sup> See John Derrick, *The Image of Irelande*, 1581: "My soul doth detest their wild shamrock manners."

<sup>514</sup> See, particularly, Daniel Hack's (1996) discussion of the unique social and political position in which the Anglo-Irish find themselves in the period leading up to Union: "This group's identity is not so much national as what might be called inter-national, constituted as it is by the negotiation—not the union but the *trait d'union*—between two nations, two national identities" (147).

<sup>515</sup> Kaufman and Fauske 2004, 12.

<sup>516</sup> Richard Lovell Edgeworth, for example, was a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, a group that Butler (1972, 34) calls an informal "pioneer industrial research establishment," whose members applied practical science in the solution of industrial problems. While they and their inventions were often viewed indulgently as cranks by contemporaries, many of their ideas find expression in modern-day commonplaces (34-35).

action may express resistance without being employed so intentionally by the actor. A particular expression of resistance may become so overly familiar to both the subjugated and the dominant group members that it becomes a *mode of being* rather than a political expression *per se*.<sup>517</sup> In this way, resistance becomes encoded in the everyday relationship between dominant and subordinate; indeed, it may come to *define* that relationship, as subaltern theorists in the area of postcolonial studies have recently suggested.<sup>518</sup> For example, the assumption on the part of *Castle Rackrent*'s fictional "Editor" that Thady is ignorant and naïve enables Thady to say and do many things that under normal circumstances might be considered to be of questionable taste and accuracy but that are excused (by the Editor and potentially the reading audience as well) precisely because he is assumed to be ignorant and naïve. "Playing the fool" (for Thady and the native-Irish population he represents) and "suffering the fool" (for the Editor and the Anglo-Irish and English gentry he represents) are necessary modes of being. Suffering the fool enables the dominant group to dismiss the fool and what he says or does as harmless and inferior, and at the same time to justify its own position of power as necessary to remedy the supposed ignorance or ineptitude of the subordinate group. Playing the fool enables members of the subjugated group to say and do what they wish without fear of

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<sup>517</sup> For example, Eagleton (1995, 167) likens Thady's "self-serving blunders and oversights" to Freudian parapraxes: "Serflike ... fidelity is just the taken-for-granted form of one's perceptions, which cannot even be intelligibly called into question, which is ideologically prohibited from being raised to an object of conscious criticism, which discredits itself in the slips and crevices of one's discourse. Thady's self-serving blunders and oversights—dropping a pen, for example, so as to continue the more conveniently to eavesdrop on his master's affairs—would then be in a precise sense Freudian parapraxes, symptoms of a smouldering animosity barred from the conscious mind. Such a reading of the work is wholly debatable; but it would make the novel an extraordinary perceptive portrait of the workings of ideology, in which conscious beliefs and unconscious intentions can certainly be at odds; and it would chime with Edgeworth's sense, elsewhere in her writing, that truth and fiction in Ireland are not so much at odds as inextricably intermingled."

<sup>518</sup> "Subaltern" is the term in postcolonial theory used to describe the perspectives and ideas of those social groups outside the hegemonic or dominant power structures in a particular society. The definition of the term is still a subject of debate: some scholars prefer a general usage that would see any marginalized or lower-class group labeled "subaltern"; others suggest that the term be reserved for those who have no voice or agency at all within the dominant public discourse. One of the leading subaltern theorists, Homi Bhabha, highlights the importance of social power relationships in his definition of "subaltern," suggesting that "subaltern" refers to an oppressed, minority group whose presence is fundamental to the self-definition of the dominant group (and thus has the potential to subvert the authority of the hegemonic power structure). See Bhabha 1994, Bhabha 1996a and 1996b are also relevant.

reprisal from the colonizer and to safely exchange ideas, share experiences with each other, and in some cases organise their responses to the dominant group.<sup>519</sup>

In a similar way, I argue, a text may conceal expressions of resistance without necessarily being used consciously by the author for that purpose. In other words, embedded transcripts of resistance may or may not be perceived by the author at the time she records the narrative. We might say that a text can indirectly record *modes of being* rather than hidden transcripts of resistance. Only our suspicious reading of such a text reveals a hidden transcript of social or political subversion.

When we view *Castle Rackrent* as a record of modes of being, then Edgeworth's intentions for the text are not as important to our investigation. That is, how Maria Edgeworth *intended* Thady Quirk to be read by her audience (as naïve peasant or as calculating rebel) and whether or not she intended *Castle Rackrent* to be a "tale of other times" or a warning for the future are secondary. More important is how she exposes, wittingly or unwittingly, the nature of the relationship between Thady and the Rackrents and the nature of the relationship between Thady and the Editor, both suggestive of the nature of the primary dominant/subordinate relationships in Edgeworth's Ireland. A suspicious reading of these relationships gives us insight into the resistance encoded in Thady's narrative—Thady's resistance, of course, but also Edgeworth's. Whether either one is consciously aware of this encoded subversion is immaterial. Indeed, to expect that a manservant who has never known independence from servitude or an Anglo-Irishwoman who has never known a public political forum will actively and consciously resist the status quo may very well be rooted in our own twentieth-century perspective that such inequities are socially unacceptable and demand redress. To consciously voice resistance, one must have an alternative in mind: What am I resisting? What do I envision instead? Possibly one's hidden transcript of resistance may be hidden even from oneself, awaiting the illumination of changed social and political circumstances, and for the time being expressed as a mode of being rather than a transcript of resistance *per se*.

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<sup>519</sup> James Scott (1990) notes the importance of "the fool" for his hidden-transcripts model (see especially 162-66). The usefulness of "playing dumb" in dominant/subordinate situations has been noted elsewhere as well. See, for example, Herzog 2004.

### Subaltern theory

In the 1980s, a group of South Asian scholars led by Ranajit Guha set out to define a new area of postcolonial research, seeking a “people’s history” for India, or a “history from below.” Using Antonio Gramsci’s term “subaltern”<sup>520</sup> to refer to those people outside the elite and middle-classes, the Subaltern Studies project aimed to reveal Indian history as it was experienced by those “silenced” by British imperialism and by the indigenous middle-classes, and thus “wittingly or unwittingly by colonialist historians and even nationalist historians—the former ideologues of imperialism, the latter spokespersons for the indigenous elite.”<sup>521</sup> The effect of such silencing, subaltern theorists argued, was to edit out the experiences, perspectives and agency of the subordinate group, so that in contemporary official records (written by government representatives) and in personal memoirs (generally penned by members of a middle-class elite) and in later historiographies (which often used as their sources those official records and memoirs), members of the subordinate group had no autonomous existence—indeed, no existence at all outside that determined for them by the perspectives and agenda of the dominant group. In conventional historiographies, if subaltern insurgency or peasant rebellion was not likened to unpredictable natural events that “break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics,”<sup>522</sup> then it was cast as a knee-jerk, involuntary reaction to external social, economic or political causes rather than a conscious and calculated move on the part of the peasant or subordinate group. Subaltern scholars argued that by stripping the subaltern of agency, these historical models distorted historical events. In contrast, scholars maintained, subalterns had acted throughout (Indian) history “*on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite*” and that, in fact, subaltern politics was “an *autonomous* domain, for it

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<sup>520</sup> See Gramsci 1992, 1967.

<sup>521</sup> Fox 1989, 887. The subalterns have been “silenced” because, as Hauser (1991) summarizes Guha’s introductory argument, all Indian histories, “whether colonial, national, Marxist, or neocolonial, [have] been written by the elite, about the elite, and for the elite and by definition and intent in the process [have] ignored everyone else” (242).

<sup>522</sup> Guha 1988b, 46.

neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter."<sup>523</sup> The original goals of the Subaltern Studies project were thus to 1) recall the subaltern voice and 2) recover subaltern autonomy and agency, in effect to restore the subalterns' role "as actors of purpose in their own history."<sup>524</sup>

Recovering a "history from below" is a goal not unique to the subaltern historian; scholars writing within various conventional genres have professed to write a "people's history."<sup>525</sup> Yet the subaltern scholars criticize, for example, colonialist, nationalist and Marxist modes of historiography, charging that these "have treated the subordinate peoples of South Asian society as if they had no consciousness of their own, and hence no ability to make their own history."<sup>526</sup> As Gyan Prakash (1994) summarizes, the subaltern scholar aims to "[read] records against their grain," seeking to "uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies, and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography has laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect."<sup>527</sup> Subaltern Studies scholars charge that traditional historiographies have "failed to penetrate" a vast realm of human experience, and that any claim these might make to "comprehensiveness" or "universality" are erroneous.<sup>528</sup>

The original Subaltern Studies project rests on several assumptions that have received considerable criticism. Partha Chatterjee asserts that the subaltern historian's task "is to fill up this emptiness, that is, the representation of subaltern consciousness in elitist historiography. It must be given its own specific content with its own history and development ... Only then can we recreate not merely a whole aspect of human history whose existence elitist historiography has hitherto denied,

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<sup>523</sup> Guha 1988a, 39-40.

<sup>524</sup> Hauser 1991, 242.

<sup>525</sup> See Bhattacharya 1983, who considers, among other genres, nationalist, liberal and Marxist historiographies from this perspective.

<sup>526</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 192.

<sup>527</sup> That is, where the "cause" and "effect" are laid out according to a colonial or nationalist (generally Western) narratives (Prakash 1994, 1479).

<sup>528</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 195. By this point, the reader should begin to recognize possible parallels between the "subaltern experience" and the "oral-traditional experience": Where the oral-traditional experience has been largely passed over in traditional historiography (due in no small part to the fact that there are few written texts to act as witness to oral tradition), Subaltern Studies scholars argue that the perspective of the subaltern has been omitted from modern-era accounts of important events.

but also the history of the 'modern' period."<sup>529</sup> Yet "filling up" this empty space implies a) that there is a "vessel" to be filled (i.e., that the subaltern indeed *has* a consciousness, history and development of its own, separate from the dominant group and from the portrayals of elitist historiography), and b) that it is possible to ascertain, observe and recover such content. Not only does Chatterjee's articulation of the task assume that an "original" subaltern experience exists to be revealed and that the contemporary historian is able to "penetrate" it, but "the very notion of the restoration of an original presence suggests—and particularly so where the presence is an 'insubordinate' or resistant one—the means by which it is to be done."<sup>530</sup> Yet the means and methods most obviously available to the modern historian are very like those means and methods employed in conventional historiographies—and their appropriateness as tools for recovering the subaltern experience is questionable. If we are to restore the subaltern as an independent agent, as author of his own destiny "through the recognition of his capacity for purposeful action" rather than as a product of elitist perspective ("the helpless victim of impersonal forces ... the blind follower of others"<sup>531</sup>), then we risk applying exactly those conventions of traditional historiography that subaltern scholars have criticized as inadequate for the study of subaltern experience.

That a conventional historiography may not demonstrate subaltern agency does not necessarily mean that such an agency actually exists to be represented in any form recognizable within the bounds of conventional historiography. This relatively unexamined assumption, which until recently underlay much of the Subaltern Studies program, implies that the subaltern experience is valuable in large part because *it is also a subject-agent experience*. Yet must a member of a subordinate group be an agent in a history of his own making to be a meaningful contributor to human experience? Do we impose an autonomy on the subaltern that is representative not of the subaltern himself but, rather, of our expectations of what constitutes a figure of historical importance? Whose values are being represented

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<sup>529</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Peasants, Politics and Historiography: A Response," *Social Scientist* 120 (1983), quoted in O'Hanlon 1988, 196.

<sup>530</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 196.

<sup>531</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 196.

when we attribute subject-agency to the subaltern—the values of the subaltern or the values of the historian? Critics of subaltern theory have questioned whether, in attributing a Western-style autonomy to the subaltern, we come too close to imposing a kind of Enlightenment humanism (wherein value is placed on the rational human subject who exerts some measure of control or agency over his environment) on a group of people whom the subaltern scholar has already determined should not be viewed through such conventional, Eurocentric historical lenses:

The difficulty ... is that in the assertion—which is very difficult *not* to make, without having to abandon the strategy altogether—that subordinate groups have a history which is not given to them by elites, but is a history of *their own*, we arrive at a position which requires some subtlety and skill if it is to be held from slipping into an essentialist humanism. This skill will depend in very large part precisely upon our rejection of humanism's obsessive invocation of origins as its ultimate legitimation and guarantee: of the myth, which gives us the idea of the self-constituting subject, that a consciousness or being which has an origin outside itself is no being at all.<sup>532</sup>

Ultimately, Rosalind O'Hanlon urges caution: "We must ... bear in mind the siren attractions of the idea of the self-constituting human subject, in a political culture in which the free and autonomous individual represents the highest value."<sup>533</sup>

Prakash (1994) has highlighted another difficulty with early subaltern theory: If the subaltern were to succeed in subverting the power of the dominant, he would also author his own destruction as a subject-agent: "[The] moment of rebellion always [contains] within it the moment of failure."<sup>534</sup> That is, once a subaltern subject-agent overthrows his dominant master, he ceases to be a subaltern subject-agent and becomes something else—all that has defined him as "subaltern" inevitably changes. While early subaltern scholars insisted on a recoverable subject-agency of the subaltern,

The desire to recover the subaltern's autonomy was repeatedly frustrated because subalternity, by definition, signified the impossibility of autonomy: subaltern rebellions only offered fleeting moments of defiance.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 197.

<sup>533</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 197.

<sup>534</sup> Prakash 1994, 1480.

<sup>535</sup> Prakash 1994, 1480.

It was this insistence on complete autonomy or subject-agency that initially limited the subaltern theory, argues Prakash: "While [subaltern] scholars failed to recognize fully that the subalterns' resistance did not simply oppose power but was also constituted by it, their own work showed this to be the case."<sup>536</sup> As subsequent *Subaltern Studies* issues would demonstrate, the search for the subaltern subject-agent would become "increasingly tangled" in the study of how the quality of subalternity was shaped by dominant discourses.<sup>537</sup>

Subalternity thus emerges in the paradoxes of the functioning of power, in the functioning of the dominant discourse as it represents and domesticates peasant agency as a spontaneous and 'pre-political' response to colonial violence. No longer does it appear outside the elite discourse as a separate domain, embodied in a figure endowed with a will that the dominant suppress and overpower but do not constitute. Instead, it refers to that impossible thought, figure, or action without which the dominant discourse cannot exist and which is acknowledged in its subterfuges and stereotypes.<sup>538</sup>

Another criticism of the Subaltern Studies project thus far is that its contributors have focused primarily on overt resistance and revolt of the subaltern in charged social and political contexts, a focus that O'Hanlon calls "the product of the insistence on agency itself: the demand for a spectacular demonstration of the subaltern's independent will and self-determining power."<sup>539</sup> Yet the subaltern exploration encourages us to reconsider our definition of power and power relations in political and social arenas that operate on unfamiliar principles and, by association, the nature of resistance. What will resistance look like in an environment that operates according to social rules that are not familiar to us? Will we know resistance in this environment when we see it? Or will we instead seek actions or events that fit our predetermined conception of resistance, based on our understanding of more familiar political and social contexts? O'Hanlon asks the key question: "How are we to configure presence [of contestation and resistance] if it is not to be in terms of liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency [?]?"<sup>540</sup> Like

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<sup>536</sup> Prakash 1994, 1480.

<sup>537</sup> Prakash 1994, 1480.

<sup>538</sup> Prakash 1994, 1483.

<sup>539</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 213.

<sup>540</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 191. O'Hanlon also points out that simply by acknowledging the presence of a subaltern character, we acknowledge an entity that is in some sense resistant, as it "eludes and refuses

Prakash, O'Hanlon argues that the subaltern theorist's claim of autonomous, independent subaltern agency is paradoxical: "the process by which the insurgent actually arrives at a sense of himself is through negation."<sup>541</sup> If the subaltern achieves self-definition through "negation of his superiors," then "[this], more than anything, should suggest that this self was constantly in the process of production, and ... mediated through symbols and signs which were external to it, those of elite authority."<sup>542</sup> This would seem to support the probability that the subaltern is ultimately *not* wholly independent and autonomous: A primary claim of the subaltern historian is brought into question.

The application of Scott's model counters, to some extent, Prakash and O'Hanlon's primary concerns regarding the subaltern historian's assertion of subaltern agency. The hidden-transcripts model extends subaltern theory to take into account those "weapons of the weak" at the subaltern's disposal—weapons that neither conventional historiographies nor early subaltern examinations have accepted as viable expressions of agency. "Everyday resistance" may never lead to open rebellion but nevertheless sustains the will of the subordinate, nurturing an environment in which such overt expressions of violence may one day flourish. Scott's model encourages us to focus not on the relative subject-agency of the subordinate, but on the *communication* that occurs (or is kept hidden) in dominant/subordinate power relationships. When emphasis is placed on the nature of the communication between dominant and subordinate (or subaltern), it becomes clear that both the subordinate and the dominant are defined in large part by their interaction with the other. Thus, while the subject-agency of the subaltern has already been called into question by critics of the original Subaltern Studies theory, Scott's model highlights in addition the highly questionable subject-agency of the dominant. If the actions of each group are shaped by each group's relationship with

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assimilation into the hegemonic, and so provides our grounds for rejecting elite historiography's insistence that the hegemonic itself is all that really exists within the social order" (219).

<sup>541</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 204. In Guha's words, "not by the properties of his own social being, but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors" (Guha 1983, 18; quoted in O'Hanlon 1988, 204).

<sup>542</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 204.

the other, then *neither* group is wholly autonomous, and neither has sole claim to agency.<sup>543</sup> Each is defined in large part by its relationship with the other.

Furthermore, if we understand “resistance” to include not only actions embodied in overt rebellion and revolt but also actions that may be embedded in everyday activities, then we can also find “agency” in what were previously understood to be less momentous events. Now we can understand “agency” to include any reaction by the subaltern to an oppressive or dominant force, and any reaction by the dominant to a subordinate or subaltern force. Agency need not originate within oneself. In this way, many subaltern expressions—such as grumbling, stealing or playing the fool, for example—can be understood not simply as reactions to an oppressive outside force (i.e., not originating within the subaltern himself), but as independent statements of resistance—or as much autonomous expressions of subaltern independence as oppressive force is an autonomous expression of the independence of the dominant.

Ultimately, Scott’s model extends Homi Bhabha’s (1994) discussion of subalternity, which sees the subaltern as essential to the self-definition of the dominant, and vice versa. Ironically, this places the former in a unique position to undermine or subvert the hegemony of the latter. The dominant/subordinate relationship is complex; the subaltern’s desire to subvert the agenda of the oppressor is not so easily equated with the subaltern’s desire to cease being a “slave” or to cease being subordinate to the dominant group. Rather, the slave’s desire to satisfy his “avenging anger” demands that at some level he retain his perspective as a slave in order to “witness himself triumphant”<sup>544</sup> over his oppressor. If he relinquishes wholly his subordinate, subaltern role—that is, if he completely supplants his

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<sup>543</sup> Guha himself (1999) acknowledges the interdependence of the two: “What the pillars of society fail to grasp is that the organizing principle [of subaltern resistance] lies in nothing other than [the dominant’s] own dominance. For it is the subjection of the rural masses to a common source of exploitation and oppression that makes them rebel even before they learn how to combine in peasant organisations” (225). As O’Hanlon sums up, once more highlighting one of the central challenges faced by the subaltern theorist, Guha’s observation points to the probability that the manner in which structures of dominance are determined in a particular society is precisely that element which is “responsible not only for the existence, but for the very form” that insurgency takes, while at the same time, the subaltern scholar’s faith in the “autonomy” of the subaltern “forbids us to make any such allusion to a cause [of insurgency] beyond itself” (O’Hanlon 1988, 206).

<sup>544</sup> O’Hanlon 1988, 205.

oppressor—then he also relinquishes the opportunity to revel in the success of his subversion. To a certain extent, the subordinate/dominant relationship is characterized by a need on the part of the subordinate to, in O’Hanlon’s words, “stand in two places”—at once retaining his subaltern perspective and successfully projecting himself into a position of power.<sup>545, 546</sup>

### **Subaltern theory and *Castle Rackrent***

Though the area of postcolonial studies was first developed by scholars in India in response to what they saw as a lack of “history from below,” historians have noted points of comparison between India and Ireland.<sup>547</sup> Under British rule, Indian history was written primarily from the perspective of the colonial British elite, which tended to omit a native Indian understanding of events. When Indian history was written by native authors, it took on the conventions of Western historiography, often using as source material information that was compiled by imperial representatives or that reflected imperial values. Ireland was colonized much earlier than India, but Britain employed similar governing tactics in both colonies. Issues of land-ownership, politics, language, historiography and religious conflict in both Ireland and India suggest not only that comparable rule was imposed in the two colonies, but that responses by the native populations in the two countries to the process of being “othered” by the British colonizing program were also comparable. Similar political circumstances helped to produce similar social ills. As a direct result of British rule, both colonies experienced a sudden shift in the market economy (having to contend

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<sup>545</sup> We can note parallels here between this perspective and the two-toned tale of Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*. As I discuss below, Thady Quirk tells two narratives at once: one is a subaltern tale from the perspective of a subordinate wholly complicit in the social structures and power relationships that ensure he remains subordinate, submissive and accepting of his role; the other tale is a tale of resistance, in which Thady—while retaining his subordinate perspective—invites us to witness the subversion of the dominant hegemony in large part via the actions of, in postcolonial terms, the subaltern. Were he not to retain his subaltern perspective—that is, were he to narrate the tale wholly from the perspective of a man who had forgotten slavery—his revenge would not be as sweet, and the tale would lose a great deal, if not all, of its irony.

<sup>546</sup> O’Hanlon (1988) points out that the subaltern’s desire to subvert hegemonic power also does not seem to translate into a desire necessarily to destroy the symbols of that hegemonic power (205-6).

<sup>547</sup> See, for example, Bayly 2000 and Cook 1993.

with what C.A. Bayly [2000] calls the “straightjacket of free trade”<sup>548</sup> and the thriving markets of the British Empire), a similarly sudden shift in land-ownership and land usage (and a corresponding shift in class and social status among native populations), and a new infrastructure that placed social and political power firmly in the hands of non-natives—in many cases non-inhabitants. Both colonies also experienced population explosions in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which placed additional pressures on already fractured social systems. Bayly points out, for example, that “[by] 1827 G.H. Harrington, a Bengal revenue administrator, [had] denounced Cornwallis’s permanent settlement because it had produced in India not the intended improving English-style landlords but absentee Irish-style rack-renters.”<sup>549</sup>

The experiences of the subordinate Irish population are like enough to those of the subaltern Indian population to use similar models and employ a similar language in our search for hidden transcripts. As Richard Fox (1989) observes, “What all subalterns seem to share (and perhaps all they share) is an unequal relationship ... They are suppressed by imperialism and by the indigenous middle-class elite; they are also silenced wittingly or unwittingly by colonialist historians and even nationalist historians—the former ideologues of imperialism, the latter spokespersons for the indigenous elite.”<sup>550</sup> Equally important for our investigation is the likelihood that there is no autonomous, subject-agent subaltern to give voice to but, rather, that subordinate and dominant groups alike are defined in relation to each other and that neither is wholly autonomous.<sup>551</sup> What Fox writes of Indian history could just as easily apply to Irish history: “Indian history happened from the bottom up, but also from the top down and the middle round, in a complex

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<sup>548</sup> Bayly 2000, 380.

<sup>549</sup> Bayly 2000, 379-80.

<sup>550</sup> Fox 1989, 887.

<sup>551</sup> Ironically, this holds true for historians and other observers of culture as well, including ourselves: “the subaltern historian cannot exist independent of the historians [he] deauthorize[s] as bourgeois nationalists” (Fox 1989, 888). Arguably, the “hidden transcripts” of a subordinate population exist in part because we choose to seek a history in which the subaltern population has a voice. We have created a historical narrative that includes such a transcript *in response to* the traditional historical perspective that traces history through the actions of the dominant population and ignores the role of the subordinate except as a function of dominant power. Thus, the “subaltern voice” is defined at least in part by the dominant voice of traditional history.

interdependence, manipulation, and cooptation that neither elite nor subaltern histories and historians alone can hope to capture.”<sup>552</sup> Because the definition of “subaltern” shifts as the relationship between the dominant and the subaltern changes, hidden transcripts of resistance (i.e., resistance other than overt rebellion and revolution) may be discernible only in the ongoing discourse between the two groups or, as Prakash suggests, the “interstices” of such discourse.<sup>553</sup>

### ***Castle Rackrent: Reading against the grain***

*Castle Rackrent* is the earliest and best known of Maria Edgeworth’s Irish novels.<sup>554</sup> The tale is narrated in the first person by the aged Thady Quirk, the professedly loyal Rackrent family retainer, who relates the dubious Rackrent family history and the fate of the family’s deteriorating estate as it passes through the hands of four Rackrent masters and finally into the Quirk family itself, when the destitute Sir Condy Rackrent signs it over to Thady’s son Jason. The narrative is in two parts: the first part recounts the fate of the first three Rackrents, Sirs Patrick, Murtagh and Kit; the second part tells of the rise and fall of the hapless Sir Condy. There is also an editorial carapace, consisting of a Preface, a Glossary and Notes by a fictional Editor, whose explanatory commentary serves to place Thady’s narrative in a wider social context. While the focus of Thady’s tale is ostensibly the Rackrent family history, the narrative “is as much about the rise of the Quirks as the fall of the Rackrents,”<sup>555</sup> for the misfortunes of the Rackrents serve to fuel (and finance) the eventual success of Jason “Attorney” Quirk.

It is possible to read the novel as a straightforward account of the sad fate of the Rackrent family, to shake our heads at the generations of bad judgment that ultimately end in Sir Condy’s ignominious death by drink,<sup>556</sup> and to marvel at the

<sup>552</sup> Fox 1989, 888.

<sup>553</sup> Prakash 1994, 1482.

<sup>554</sup> Edgeworth was the first author to write English-language novels set in Ireland, populated with Irish characters, and addressing Irish themes. These are known as her “Irish novels.”

<sup>555</sup> McLoughlin 2002, 93.

<sup>556</sup> And there is considerable evidence to suggest that Edgeworth’s largely English audience of the time *did* read the book as a reliable account of contemporary Irish social circumstances and character, much to the apparent dismay of the Edgeworths, who insisted that the novel was “a representation of

blind loyalty of the tale's narrator. The novel was accepted as such by contemporary audiences—a witty social dialogue, and a window onto a vulgar, “rustic world” largely unfamiliar to most members of the audience, yet believable precisely because of the simplicity and guilelessness of its narrator.<sup>557</sup> But as Marilyn Butler (1972) warns, Edgeworth “succeeds from the outset in making a fool of unwary commentators”<sup>558</sup>: While most early critics find in Thady a plain and simple, loyal soul, the critical consensus “has begun to swing the other way,”<sup>559</sup> for the novel is characterized by contradiction and encourages a more complex reading. The fictional Editor advises us in his Preface that

Thady's language ... is a specimen of a mode of rhetoric common in Ireland. An astonishing assertion is made in the beginning of a sentence, which ceases to be in the least surprising, when you hear the qualifying explanation that follows. Thus a man who is in the last stage of staggering drunkenness will, if he can articulate, swear to you—‘Upon his conscience now, and may he never stir from the spot alive if he is telling a lie, upon his conscience he has not tasted a drop of anything, good or bad, since morning at-all-at-all, but half a pint of whisky, please your honour.’<sup>560</sup>

Thus duly warned, we should not be surprised when Thady's narrative follows a distinctive pattern: He salts his tale liberally with professions of loyalty and love, and then gives us such a detailed and sordid account of the Rackrent affairs that we doubt such a family could ever inspire anyone's good feeling. He professes his own ignorance, and then relates details that illustrate precisely the extent of his knowledge and his insight into human character. He extols the virtues of a man, and then tells us a tale that demonstrates the man's opposite qualities. In one breath he professes admiration for the Rackrents, with the next he details their sorry downfall.

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*past* manners that should flatter the present generation.” In a letter to his father-in-law, Richard Lovell Edgeworth writes, “We hear from good authority that the king [George III] was much pleased with Castle Rack Rent—he rubbed his hands & said what what—I know something now of my Irish subjects” (quoted in Butler 1972, 359). What exactly the king thought he now “knew” of his Irish subjects is open to question.

<sup>557</sup> See Butler 1992, 7-8.

<sup>558</sup> Butler 1992, 8.

<sup>559</sup> Butler 1992, 8. Indeed, Michael Neill, writing in 2001, accuses Butler's 1972 biography of Maria Edgeworth of including exactly that sort of reading of Thady that in 1992 Butler attributes to these “early critics”: “In Butler's [1972] reading Thady's utter loyalty to the Rackrent family is incontestably genuine and often affecting” (79). Neill allows that Butler has since “moved towards a more wary inspection of Thady's pretensions” (79), citing as an example her 1992 Introduction to the Penguin publication of *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*.

<sup>560</sup> Edgeworth 1992, 91.

By the end of the narrative, the suspicious reader questions whether the illiterate and supposedly simple Thady Quirk is not instead a rather dubious and complex character indeed. Arguably, it is Thady's actions that pave the way for his son's eventual takeover of the estate. And while Thady repeatedly professes to the Editor his lack of sophistication and his general ignorance of gentlemanly subjects—the law, politics, business and social custom—it is ultimately through such professions of ignorance that the reader learns much about Irish law, politics, business and social custom.

### **Ethnography of the text: Political and social environment**

Maria Edgeworth lived and wrote during a volatile period in Irish history. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, relations between the native Irish and the Ascendancy were tense and complicated, frequently erupting in violence. At the same time, it was possible for liberal-minded political reformers such as Maria Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, to believe that real social progress was being made. By the time Maria began writing *Castle Rackrent*, many of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws<sup>561</sup> had been modified or repealed altogether, and restrictions against Catholics were not as prohibitive as they had been in the past. Education opportunities for Catholics were increasingly varied, and there was a growing Catholic middle class. Thus it was possible for Richard Lovell Edgeworth and other like-minded members of the Protestant Ascendancy to speak of the benefits of education for the native Irish,<sup>562</sup> to encourage improved landlord-tenant relationships

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<sup>561</sup> See the discussion below.

<sup>562</sup> There were two schools of thought regarding education and literacy for the lower classes in eighteenth-century Ireland: Many members of the upper classes felt that educating the native-Irish poor would give them "aspirations above their station" (Cullen 1990, 26), which would encourage an even greater degree of discontent and disillusionment and, in all likelihood, rebellion. Others (including liberal members of the Ascendancy and many representatives of the Protestant Church) saw education as the only cure for native-Irish "superstition," "idolatry" and "wild Irish manners." In 1730, Hugh Boulter, Protestant archbishop of Armagh, suggested in a petition to the English government that

"[a]mong the ways proper to be taken for converting and civilizing these poor deluded people, and bringing them (through the blessing of God) in time, to be good Christians and faithful subjects, one of the most necessary and without which all others are like to prove ineffectual,

in order to ensure native-Irish social and economic satisfaction (rather than over-regulating the Irish into submission), even to champion the value of a native Irishman's loyalty. At the same time, however, English preconceptions about the Irish continued to shape political philosophy and foster antagonism.

The Irish have long held a special allure for the English.<sup>563</sup> Their exotic appeal was a source of unease for English rulers, who found the Irish difficult to understand:

How could the Irish be both savage and subtle? Both warlike and lazy? At once evidently "inferior", yet possessed of an ungovernable pride? Cowardly, yet of legendary fortitude in the face of death? Socially primitive, but capable of complex litigation? .... They were dirty, lazy, dishonest and violent. Their laws were unethical and inequitable. Yet these "corrupt customs" had invariably fascinated and drawn in the English who settled in Ireland, "degenerating" them.<sup>564</sup>

The need to "control Ireland" quickly became synonymous with the need to "control the Irish"—both to ensure that English settlers in Ireland did not become completely assimilated into the native culture and to ensure that the unpredictable and wily Irish were tamed and made to contribute positively to the new economic and social environment. Foster clarifies: "Irish *mores* could be useful to the conquest, as in the easy alliance of chiefs against each other [, for] the English ambition was, after all,

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has always been thought to be that a sufficient number of English protestant schools be erected and established, wherein the children of Irish natives might be instructed in the English tongue, and the fundamental principles of true religion, to both of which they are generally great strangers. (in Akenson 1970, 30-31)

Proper schooling and reading instruction would expose a student to "right principles and perceptions": In 1747, the Synod of Ulster in 1747 suggested that unlearned men limit their reading to the "sacred scriptures, and such practical sound writings as by divine blessing may be of use to fill their hearts with grace and not their heads with vain disputes or dangerous errors" (cited in Barnard 1999, 64). Though the Edgeworths supported native-Irish education, they supported a particular *kind* of education. Richard Lovell Edgeworth wrote to the Irish Board of Education in 1808: "I have been told, that in some schools the Greek and Roman histories are forbidden; such abridgements of these histories, as I have seen, are certainly improper; they inculcate democracy, and a foolish hankering after undefined liberty: this is particularly dangerous in Ireland ..." (in Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1999, 126). In 1911, Edgeworth advocated putting "good books ... that shall entertain and instruct ... into the hands of the children of the poor, and they will soon form a taste that must disdain ... disgusting trash" (in Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1999, 142).

<sup>563</sup> The Normans invaded Ireland in 1166. Henry VIII acceded the English throne in 1507 and declared himself king of Ireland in 1541. Under the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), the English occupation of Ireland became more brutal: the Elizabethan wars (from 1562) sanctioned violence against both the Gaelic Irish and the Old English (both populations were Catholic).

<sup>564</sup> Foster 1988, 25.

to create a stable landowning aristocracy as well as English law and a docile Church[, but the] more potent [issue] was, first, the dangerous fascination that ‘wild shamrock manners’ had for those who had settled in the country; and second, the fact that the picture of Irish habits observed by English visitors coincided with contemporary anthropological ideas of savagery.”<sup>565</sup>

Long before the publication of *Castle Rackrent*, then, the stereotype of “the wild Irish” was deeply entrenched. To the English public, the Irish were savage first and foremost because they were Catholic—and a rather “lax and archaic” type of Catholic at that.<sup>566</sup> Second, they were superstitious—their language and traditional folklore were populated with fairies and daemons, and their rituals suggested an acceptance of otherworldly forces that had no place in the English Christian tradition. Third, the Irish did not cultivate their land—at least, not in any manner considered by the English to be organized and productive. While parts of Ireland were certainly beautiful (“sprinkled with many very sweet islands and goodly lakes like little inland seas”<sup>567</sup>), many areas were deemed inhospitable and impassable: peat bogs and marsh vegetation were unattractive to the refined English sensibilities and not sufficiently “useful.”

Further to their discredit, the Irish engaged in a number of “heathen” practices. Sexual dalliance was acceptable and the ties of family and marriage were not revered in an acceptably English manner. The complex Irish laws of the *tuath* allowed a family to increase its familial circle by entering into a deliberate commitment (that is, other than marriage) with other families. It was possible, for example, for a foster brother to be more deeply committed to his foster sibling than

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<sup>565</sup> Foster, 1988, 32. Indeed, we find unflattering perceptions of Ireland much earlier than this. Strabo (63/64 BCE- c. 24 CE) (*Geography* 4:5.4) writes, “Concerning this island I have nothing certain to tell, except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters . . . , and since, further, they count it an honourable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them, and openly to have intercourse, not only with the other women, but also with their mothers and sisters.” Roman geographer Pomponius Mela (d. c. 45 CE) (*Description of the World* 3:53) writes that the inhabitants of Iuverna (Ireland) “are undisciplined and ignorant of all virtue, to a greater degree than any other nation.” Gerald of Wales (c. 1146-1223) writes of the Irish that “although they are fully endowed with natural gifts, their external characteristics of beard and dress, and internal cultivation of the mind are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture” (from his *History and Topography of Ireland*, in Anderson and Bellenger 2003, 291).

<sup>566</sup> Foster 1988, 30.

<sup>567</sup> Spenser, cited in Foster 1988, 33.

to his natural sibling.<sup>568</sup> Irish women were less conservative than English women, in both dress and bearing: they drank alcohol, they greeted strangers in public with a social kiss, they wore what the English considered to be provocative clothing, they could elect to keep their own names after marriage and they could demand (and receive) a divorce. To the English, even the Irish mode of speech belied a general untrustworthiness: the use of extended, obviously exaggerated narrative, and an over-fondness for metaphor, hyperbole, overstatement, irony and analogy were viewed as duplicitous and cemented the English perception of the Irish as scheming, lazy, deceitful and, ultimately, rebellious. The Irish legal system and the Irish land title system were so complex and so different from the English system that they seemed to the English to be a “celebration of anarchy,”<sup>569</sup> purposely designed to confuse the outsider: “the world of cattle-raids, Brehons and poets [was] arrogantly archaic and deliberately mystifying: a world at once bogus and perverse, which could only be civilized by means of plantation.”<sup>570</sup> Such a wild and recalcitrant subject nation required a forceful imposition of English civility.

In their conquest of Ireland, the English made little effort to understand their new subjects. The possibility that the Irish might have a sophisticated culture of their own was not entertained; it was easier to view them as simpletons. Patricia Palmer (2001) points to the Englishman’s lack of curiosity about the Irish language as a marker of England’s general disinterest in the specifics of Irish culture. She muses that although “[t]here is an almost irresistible inclination to imagine that soldiers and administrators whose whole adulthood was spent in Ireland ‘must have’ acquired Irish in the process,” the evidence we have does not support this.<sup>571</sup> She considers the Elizabethan colonial word-lists given to English newcomers to Ireland—a sort of “Coles Notes” to the Irish language—and suggests that the spirit in which they were compiled and used set the stage for subsequent cultural misunderstandings:

Most newcomers’ brush with Irish was restricted to mastering the seventy-odd items on the colonial word-list. The list was a negative supplement to English, encompassing native oddities and aberrations outsider the range of the

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<sup>568</sup> Foster 1988, 26.

<sup>569</sup> Foster 1988, 26.

<sup>570</sup> Foster 1988, 32.

<sup>571</sup> Palmer 2001, 76.

colonists' civil lexicon. The colonial mind in classificatory mode inclines to binary distinctions .... The Elizabethans' Irish word-list was little more than an inventory of vile customs, menacing figures, hostile terrain and despised social practices. Equipped only with this pidgin roll-call of native peculiarities, the newcomers' encounter with Irish-speakers and their language would inevitably be distorted .... If the colonial word-list did not lead the Elizabethans into contact with Irish-speakers, neither did it lead them into any rapport, however elementary, with Irish. Its systems escape them, semantically and phonetically; as they dealt only in individual words, the articulations of grammar did not concern them. Their glosses are often inaccurate, or wrong.<sup>572</sup>

This general disinterest in the Irish language on the part of English colonizers after Henry VIII<sup>573</sup> enabled the Irish to disguise politically and socially subversive ideas through their use of all the idiomatic structures—the figurative nooks and crannies—that an oral-cultural tradition provides the fluent and imaginative adept. The Irish language provided “a linguistic haven for customs and attitudes inimical to English values,”<sup>574</sup> while continued English ignorance of the Irish language served only to fuel the growing English anxiety about Irish duplicity, until the “deceptive, rebellious Irishman” was not simply a spectre to fear but a known entity: “The ‘Irish’ conjured up by the Elizabethans, uncomprehended, detached from philological reality, was less a language than the dissidence and contrariness which it encoded. To speak Irish—or not to speak English—is seen less as a linguistic fact than as a symbolic option.”<sup>575</sup> Thus can Palmer conclude that from the sixteenth century on, the Irish language was seen as “the rebel’s tongue,” “synonymous with the political and religious dissidence to which it gave voice.”<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Palmer 2001, 86-87.

<sup>573</sup> The emphasis on English as the preferred language was enshrined in the 1537 “act for the English order, habite, and language,” which mandated that “the English tongue should be taught to children and commonly spoken, and specified that the Anglican church would be responsible for the education of Irish children in English ways, by calling on all men taking Holy Orders to take the oath that they would teach and learn the English language” (Fallon 2005, 118). Despite such measures, the Irish tongue “remained the spoken language of the great mass of people,” and language became a fairly clear marker of social status, social interest, and ethnicity. English was the language of administration and politics, and Irish was the language of everyday peasant life—yet even Trinity College supported the use of the Irish language “as a tool for the proselytization of the Catholic peasantry to the established church” (119-20).

<sup>574</sup> Palmer 2001, 95.

<sup>575</sup> Palmer 2001, 96.

<sup>576</sup> Palmer 2001, 97.

With the introduction of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws in 1695, it became increasingly difficult for Catholics to participate in social, economic and political life in Ireland. Civil disobedience was common, and the Old English and native Irish families—both generally Catholic—found that their interests were increasingly similar as social and political divisions began to fall more along religious lines than along national or ethnic ones. Catholics were excluded from the professions and from Parliament, and had restricted access to education.<sup>577</sup> By 1714, only seven percent of the land in Ireland remained in the hands of Catholic landowners. Prejudicial inheritance laws restricted Catholic landowning even further.<sup>578</sup>

Yet by the late eighteenth century many of the restrictions had been lifted<sup>579</sup>—and there is at least some disagreement as to how strictly and universally some of the Penal Laws were enforced in the first place.<sup>580</sup> The division between native-Irish

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<sup>577</sup> Schooling for the lower classes, when it existed, was often provided through the Protestant Church, and was thus not open to Catholics, or was simply not palatable to the Old English and native Irish families (both of which were usually Catholic).

<sup>578</sup> Although Edgeworth does not refer specifically to this penal law in *Castle Rackrent*, it is generally assumed that the “Act of Parliament” that encourages Sir Patrick O’Shaughlin to “take and bear the surname and arms of Rackrent” (66) refers euphemistically to Sir Patrick’s conversion to Protestantism in order to inherit the Rackrent estate. See, for example, Corbett 1994, 383. Cronin (1980, 32) writes: “History, of which Maria Edgeworth was an avid reader, would certainly require us to believe that the Rackrents were Protestants. The story belongs, we have been told, to the days before 1782. It belongs, therefore, in the period of the Penal Laws, which bore heavily on Catholics in every way but most heavily of all, perhaps, in the matter of inheritance of property. Some wealthy Catholic families conformed to the rival religion in an attempt to hold on to their property. Many lost their lands through refusing to conform . . . . In eighteenth-century Ireland, those who changed their religion for profit were known quite simply as ‘perverts’ and since the whole tale of the Rackrents’ misdeeds centres on repeated reversals of their proper role, it seems acceptable that they begin by renouncing what they ought to have held most dear.”

<sup>579</sup> For example, the Act of 1782 eased both land-inheritance restrictions and education restrictions, and government officials admitted that the restrictions had ultimately failed to achieve at least one of the goals for which they were intended, that is, to encourage conversion to Protestantism. In fact, there were more conversions *after* the Penal Laws were softened (Foster 1988, 206).

<sup>580</sup> Dowling (1968) suggests that the effects of the Penal Laws were felt keenly, and cites several examples (22). On the other hand, Foster is more sceptical, suggesting that “everyday practice is much harder to record than the letter of the law; and the attitude behind both can only be inferred.” He argues that by the 1730s the worst of the intolerance was over (205). Yet the turmoil of the 1790s points to the fact that resentment had seethed very close to the surface for some time, regardless of whether laws were followed to the letter or overlooked in the interests of an uneasy peace. In some cases at least it was the Irish rather than the English who were most attached to the restrictions. The Irish upper classes felt that the Penal Laws safeguarded the social hierarchy: when England attempted to lighten certain Catholic land restrictions, “the Irish parliament—fiercely conscious of the forfeitures on which their property was based—insisted that the laws remain on the statute book, no matter how loosely enforced” (Foster 1988, 206). While patterns of intolerance and enforcement were likely not consistent over the whole of Ireland or throughout the whole of the eighteenth century—people were willing to enforce or ignore laws for political and personal reasons—there can be little

Catholic and Anglo-Irish Protestant along economic lines was not as strong as it had been in the past. There was a burgeoning Catholic middle class of landowners, farmers, businessmen and tradesmen, who had significant influence in education and other social and cultural spheres.<sup>581</sup> It was not unusual for the lower classes to include both Irish and Anglo-Irish families, who might be either Protestant or Catholic.<sup>582</sup> But there were still significant disparities between the upper and lower classes: rigid social hierarchies meant that the lower classes fought for a more significant role in political and social life in order to reap the benefits of a growing economy, and the upper classes battled to maintain the class system they enjoyed. And the cultural stereotype of the untrustworthy, unsophisticated native-Irish rebel persisted. Tensions mounted through the 1790s in the wake of the French Revolution. The historical kinship between the Irish and the French was of concern to the British, who felt the revolution fueled Irish unrest. When the Irish Rebellion erupted in 1798 with some of the bloodiest violence Europe had ever seen,<sup>583</sup> Britain's worst fears about the Irish "savages" seemed justified, and a lasting solution to the "Irish problem" was deemed necessary.

The Act of Union saw Ireland officially become part of Britain on 1 January 1801. Union supporters argued that although Ireland would lose its own parliament, it would benefit from the growing English and Scottish economies. Yet the benefits of Union were debatable: others suggested that the primary purpose of the Act was "to contain the threat of difference," not encourage a greater sense of unity: "on the one hand, the Union formally integrated Ireland into Britain, replacing Ireland's parliament with representation in the British parliament; while on the other hand, it kept in place Ireland's separate, colonial administrative system ... Rather than

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doubt that legal structures served to strengthen class distinctions. Whether or not the restrictive policies were enforced as completely as they could have been is perhaps secondary to the fact of their existence: "the Penal Laws reflected Protestant fears and affected Irish mentality, creating tension of resentment born of enforced deference" (Foster 1988, 207).

<sup>581</sup> Cullen 1990.

<sup>582</sup> Cullen 1990, Foster 1988.

<sup>583</sup> Egenolf (2005, 845) writes that "[a]s many as 30,000 people were killed in the Irish rebellion—more than in the French Reign of Terror." Though Irish rebels were able to establish a republican government at Wexford, the minor victory was short-lived: French support arrived in Ireland too late, and the British prevailed. The Union with Great Britain in 1800 dispensed with the Irish Parliament altogether.

creating a true merging of national identities, the Union became the focus of Catholic nationalism and only intensified the precarious 'dual identity' of the Anglo-Irish or Protestant Ascendancy, who were more clearly than ever 'domestically ... overlords, but externally ... dependents.'"<sup>584</sup> After Union, political and religious tensions in Ireland continued to grow, especially when it became clear that the government was not going to follow through on its promise of Catholic emancipation, one of the agreements embedded in the Union deal. Equality would not be achieved until 1829.<sup>585</sup>

*The author's life: Rebellions, revolutions and Rackrent*

It is difficult to imagine Maria Edgeworth's writing *not* being affected profoundly by the social and political turmoil during the last decades of the eighteenth century, when *Castle Rackrent* was written.<sup>586</sup> The challenge is to determine how such events shaped the novel, Edgeworth's characterization of Thady Quirk, and the meaning(s) Edgeworth embedded within the text, wittingly or no.

Edgeworth's novels, her educational texts, her personal correspondence to family and friends, her notes and the commentaries on her life by family members and scholars serve to paint an image of a complex, intelligent and eloquent woman with an extraordinary ability to blend in to the backdrop of a range of social settings, and to recreate on paper the people who populated them. But what we know complicates our interpretation of the text as much as it clarifies it. Butler (1972), for example, suggests that Maria was driven by the desire to please—particularly to please her father, but also to please certain admired critics, and her reading public. She was also fuelled by a wish to ensure that the father she loved so dearly was liked and understood by English and Irish upper-class society—a task that became increasingly difficult as the public became impatient with Edgeworth's didactic posturing and began to question Edgeworth's influence over his daughter's writing.

<sup>584</sup> Hack 1996, 146n3, citing Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London: Allen, 1983): 27.

<sup>585</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 3.

<sup>586</sup> Egenolf (2005, 851) goes so far as to suggest that any reading of *Castle Rackrent* "is incomplete without considering these surrounding events."

We know that Richard Lovell Edgeworth read all of Maria's writing; we also know that Maria's ideas on education and literacy were influenced by his beliefs.<sup>587</sup>

Arguably Edgeworth's desire to please her audience sets the stage for a text that incorporates hidden meaning beneath a patina of socially and politically acceptable dialogue. Though born in England, Maria identified herself as Irish. She was both delighted and proud of the native Irishman's figurative use of the English language and fascinated by Irish irony and self-deprecatory expression.<sup>588</sup> She does not interpret Thady—she merely creates him, and lets him speak for himself. What the reader hears in Thady's voice is a believable representation of a peasant Irishman's perspective, complete with irony, double meanings and wit.<sup>589</sup> When we consider Butler's (1972) suggestion that above all else Maria aimed to please, we must wonder if on some level Maria does exactly what her fictional narrator does—tells one story to please one audience, while injecting a subtext that better reveals her own character and perspectives.<sup>590</sup>

In 1619, as part of the Protestant settlement of Ireland, Richard Lovell Edgeworth's ancestors were granted land by the English Crown in County Longford.<sup>591</sup> Edgeworth himself spent a good deal of his adult life in England, but returned to Ireland with his family in 1782, when Maria was fourteen. Richard

<sup>587</sup> Butler 1972; see especially 271-398.

<sup>588</sup> See her *Irish Bulls* (co-written with her father), an extended essay on the verbal blunders supposedly characteristic of the Irish when they speak English. The authors argue that these "blunders" actually demonstrate "the eloquence, wit and talents of the lower classes of people in Ireland" (in Butler 1972, 363).

<sup>589</sup> Some might question the ability of a young, upper-class Anglo-Irish woman to portray accurately the language and perspective of an old, Catholic manservant. I argue here that there is no monopoly on keen observation, which could be equally well represented in fiction or non-fiction, by any author. An observant upper-class Anglo-Irish female writer may bestow upon a fictional character an accurate verisimilitude of the eighteenth-century lower-class Irish mentality, where a less imaginative news reporter may fail to achieve the same for a real-life individual from the same time period and social class that the imagined Thady inhabits.

<sup>590</sup> It should be noted that, in a letter to a friend, Maria describes the genesis of the character of Thady Quirk as an exercise in literary mimicry (although it should also be noted that the letter is dated nearly four decades after *Castle Rackrent* was first written): "He was an old steward (not very old, though, at that time; I added to his age, to allow him time for generations of the family[]—I heard him when first I came to Ireland, and his dialect struck me, and his character, and I became so acquainted with it, that I could think and speak in it without effort: so that when, for mere amusement, without any ideas of publishing, I began to write a family history as Thady would tell it, he seemed to stand beside me and dictate and I wrote as fast as my pen could go" (Maria Edgeworth to Mrs. Stark, 6 September 1834, in Butler 1972, 241).

<sup>591</sup> Hack 1996, 148.

Lovell Edgeworth saw himself as an example of a new, benevolent Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendency landlord: he had frequent contact with his native-Irish tenants (unlike the absentee landlord common at the time) and was committed to improving both Irish land productivity and the social and economic lot of his tenants. In many ways, Edgeworth was the very antithesis of the Rackrents themselves:

From the moment of [Richard Edgeworth's] return ... he was involved in the reclamation of bogland, and later was an advocate for, and participator in, national schemes for such work. When comparing Ireland with England, to the Edgeworths nothing symbolized Irish backwardness more clearly than the Irish bog. Similarly, Sir Kit's indifference to good roads puts him at odds with one of Richard Edgeworth's main preoccupations. It is an indictment of the Rackrents that they wish to preserve the bog 'in the family', rather than to develop it.<sup>592</sup>

Maria was Edgeworth's second child by his first wife.<sup>593</sup> Until her father's death in 1817, she was her father's right hand, helping to oversee the family estate and manage the books, riding with him as he visited his tenants, collected rents and settled disputes.<sup>594</sup> As members of the Ascendency minority, the Edgeworths were acutely aware that their "ultimate place and legitimacy within Irish society"<sup>595</sup> increasingly demanded justification as the native Irish population continued to chafe at the penal restrictions imposed by the English crown, and steadily gained social (if not political) power.

Though a principled man, Richard Lovell Edgeworth was not an astute or diplomatic politician. Like his contemporary, Anglo-Irish political theorist and philosopher Edmund Burke, he was strongly in favour of Catholic emancipation (believing the only loyal subject was a satisfied one) and of providing education opportunities to the lower classes (he had campaigned for a seat in Parliament based on a platform of increased education opportunities for the Irish poor). He was

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<sup>592</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 84.

<sup>593</sup> Technically Maria was Edgeworth's third child, but a second son did not survive infancy. Edgeworth would have a total of four wives and twenty-two children in his lifetime.

<sup>594</sup> Her elder brother Lovell was something of a disappointment to his father—certainly not an intellectual, and not a suitable candidate for the role that Maria filled. In fact, Maria would act in much the same capacity for Lovell when he inherited the estate at their father's death in 1817. At the end of 1825, when her brother faced financial difficulties, Maria took over the management of the estate completely. See Hollingworth 1997, 2, and Butler 1972, 420-23.

<sup>595</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 4.

generally in favour of Union with Great Britain as the only way to ensure that an unstable Ireland did not collapse on itself, but he voted against the Act of Union in 1800 because of the manner in which Great Britain intended to implement the changes.<sup>596</sup> But his liberal political and social views were not welcome in the conservative Protestant rural communities of County Longford, and would nearly cost him his life during the Rebellion of 1798:

A gentleman of similar cultural background to Edgeworth ... could perfectly well understand how a man could have at one and the same time a Whiggish veneration for the Constitution, a desire to protect his country against the French [who supported the Irish in the Rebellion of 1798], a hatred of the war and a belief in Catholic emancipation; it was only in the unstable conditions of the Irish countryside that Edgeworth's progressive views took on the colour of a dangerous extremism. The point was that although Edgeworth did not believe in subversion, and was not a United Irishman, many of his neighbours thought he was. His most deeply reasoned opinions, on the importance of building up the Irish economy, would have been understood perfectly well in commercial centres like Dublin and Belfast: but at home in the depths of the Irish countryside, problems were not seen in economic but in political or rather religious terms. Even Edgeworth's management of his own estate, far from being taken as a good lesson in economics, was interpreted as a flagrant example of his 'soft' political line.<sup>597</sup>

It was Edgeworth's perceived leniency towards Catholics that inspired the distrust of partisan Protestants as civil tensions and rebel activity increased through the 1790s. When the government agreed to empower rural landlords to recruit locals and tenants to form a yeomanry to police the rural areas, Edgeworth initially refused his support when it became clear that neighbouring Protestant estate owners intended to ignore government recommendations to recruit both Catholics and Protestants in order to "bring the moderates of both sides together."<sup>598</sup> But by 1798, the threat of violence was severe enough that even the peaceful Edgeworth recognized the necessity of a protective force. Yet "the Edgeworthstown Yeomanry was not like any other corps in the neighbourhood,"<sup>599</sup> for Edgeworth recruited

<sup>596</sup> See, e.g., Cronin (1980, 23): "[Edgeworth] firmly believed that Ireland's welfare would be advanced by the Union but, characteristically, he voted against the measure because of his intense disapproval of the corrupt methods employed to bring it about."

<sup>597</sup> Butler 1972, 137.

<sup>598</sup> Butler 1972, 136.

<sup>599</sup> Butler 1972, 137.

Catholics and Protestants alike, and one of his own sons was a member of the newly established force. His fair-mindedness backfired, however, and “his band became a source not merely of dislike but of active suspicion on the part of what were now known as the Orangemen of Co. Longford.”<sup>600</sup>

So it was that the Edgeworths found themselves in a vulnerable position at the outbreak of the 1798 Rebellion. When French forces defeated the Anglo-Irish at Castlebar, their advance took them within a few miles of Edgeworthstown. What happened next is unclear: the Catholic peasantry on the Edgeworth estate took up arms (according to Edgeworth, only because a rumour had been circulated that the Orangemen were coming to massacre them), and due to a miscommunication or deliberate ill will on the part of Edgeworth’s Protestant opponents (again according to Edgeworth), his yeomanry found itself without weapons and unable to defend the estate.

With no other options available, Edgeworth evacuated his family to Longford. There he was met with open hostility and nearly hanged by an angry mob who suspected him of being a French spy. Following a decisive Anglo-Irish victory over French forces, the Edgeworths returned home, yet the fact that the Edgeworth estate had been quite deliberately spared by Catholic rebels did little to mitigate Protestant suspicions about Edgeworth’s loyalties. Eventually Edgeworth’s name was cleared, but the events made a lasting impression on Maria, who would recount in a letter to a friend that she “could talk think write of nothing but this affair my mind is so full of it.”<sup>601</sup> More than twenty years later, Maria remembers the family’s return home:

Within the house everything was as we had left it—a map that we had been consulting was still open on the library table, with pencils and slips of paper containing the first lessons in arithmetic in which some of the young people had been engaged the morning we had been driven from home; a pansy, in a glass of water, which one of the children had been copying, was still on the chimney-piece. These trivial circumstances, marking repose and tranquility, struck us at this moment with an unreasonable sort of surprise, and all that had passed seemed like an incoherent dream. The joy of having my father in safety remained, and gratitude to Heaven for his preservation. These feelings spread inexpressible pleasure over what seemed to be a new sense of existence. Even the most common things appeared delightful; the green lawn, the still groves,

<sup>600</sup> Butler 1972, 137.

<sup>601</sup> Letter to Sophy Ruxton, 19 September 1798, in Butler 1972, 139.

the birds singing, the fresh air, all external nature, and all the goods and conveniences of life, seemed to have wonderfully increased in value, from the fear into which we had been put of losing them irrevocably.<sup>602</sup>

Despite the political suspicions that hung over Richard Edgeworth, Maria and her father were well respected for their writing on educational philosophy. As a young teenager, Maria impressed her father with her French translation and writing skills; it was determined from that point that Maria would be an author. Along with her father and step-mothers, Maria supervised the education of all the Edgeworth children, most of whom were schooled almost entirely at home. The Edgeworths believed that the way forward for Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century was through education—for all levels of society. The idea of cultivating a practical, “responsible literacy” as an integral part of the education of all children underscored much of the writing and publishing that Maria Edgeworth and her father would do.<sup>603</sup> Much of the educational material used within the Edgeworth home was written by Maria herself, who created many of her characters and story lines as part of the family’s ongoing home-school program. She would go on to become one of the major contributors in the fields of educational literature for children and educational philosophy, as well as one of the most renowned female novelists of the day.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, ii, 232, in Butler 1972, 139.

<sup>603</sup> In 1808, he broached the subject with the Irish Board of Education: “I have been told, that in some schools the Greek and Roman histories are forbidden; such abridgements of these histories, as I have seen, are certainly improper; they inculcate democracy, and a foolish hankering after undefined liberty: this is particularly dangerous in Ireland ...” (cited in Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1999, 126). In 1911, Edgeworth advocated putting “good books ... that shall entertain and instruct ... into the hands of the children of the poor, and they will soon form a taste that must disdain ... disgusting trash” (cited in Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1999, 142).

<sup>604</sup> Although today arguably best known for *Castle Rackrent*, Maria Edgeworth throughout her life would profess most confidence in her educational writing (Butler 1972, 146-74). Hollingworth points out that “one of the strange features of Edgeworth’s literary history is the low status which she herself accorded to *Castle Rackrent*, and to some of her other Irish work. The Edgeworths, father and daughter, were always keen to stress the accidental, unplanned nature of the writing” (Hollingworth 1997, 7). Hollingworth goes on to argue that this “strange feature” would seem “to reflect a lack of confidence in [*Castle Rackrent*’s] respectability as a text and in the literary status of the vernacular narrative voice.” I would argue this is by no means the only obvious conclusion. Hollingworth himself reminds us that the book first appeared anonymously. Where he suggests that this “may be a strong indicator of the low esteem in which [Edgeworth] held her Irish writing, and her reluctance to be identified with the vernacular voice,” and that “[p]erhaps Edgeworth did not wish the reputation of the author of *Practical Education* to be contaminated by association with such vulgar work” (75), it is possible that the anonymous publication is instead indicative of the Edgeworths’ political

When Maria Edgeworth first penned *Castle Rackrent* in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the native Irish were still considered by the English to be something of an exotic mystery. In the years leading up to the 1798 Rebellion, English-language writing about the Irish had become increasingly hostile. The native Irishman was frequently cast as the bloodthirsty barbarian who committed horrific atrocities during the uprisings: by the time *Castle Rackrent* was published in 1800, “the monarch and the British people undoubtedly already knew a great deal more about the Irish than they wanted to remember.”<sup>605</sup> Edgeworth’s Thady Quirk must have seemed rather harmless by comparison—a doting, foolish and affable family retainer—a native Irishman over whom the English could wield confident and certain control.

*Castle Rackrent* is traditionally understood as a book written purely for the amusement of the author and perhaps her family and friends. Some argue that Maria Edgeworth thought it of little account, and that her father was unaware of its existence.<sup>606</sup> Others suggest that Edgeworth wrote the bulk of the novel without input from her father, who may or may not have had a hand in creating the editorial elements.<sup>607</sup> The first part of the tale was likely begun in 1793 or 1794; the second half of the novel was added about two years later,<sup>608</sup> prompting one scholar to reason that “if we are being rash enough to try to probe the writer’s intentions, we must allow that her views may have changed in that long period of composition and that the design of the book, short as it is, may not be conveniently all of a piece.”<sup>609</sup>

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sensibilities. The novel could be read as a (rather negative) commentary on Great Britain’s Union with Ireland, a perspective the Edgeworths initially may not have wished to be identified with.

<sup>605</sup> Egenolf 2005, 846.

<sup>606</sup> E.g., Hollingworth 1997, 74.

<sup>607</sup> There is little written about the novel in the family papers. Brian Hollingworth (1997) argues that “this lacuna itself supports Edgeworth’s contention that she wrote the story for ‘mere amusement’.... family letters suggest that her texts were very public events, involving cooperation not only with her father, but with family and friends also. Yet there is no mention of *Castle Rackrent*, either in terms of revision, or of plans for publication. Such silence seems to confirm Edgeworth’s claim concerning the unpremeditated nature of the text” (72). This is not the only conclusion that can be reached from such silence. If, for example, the text disguised political opinions not widely acceptable outside the Edgeworth family, either before or after the book’s publication (or even opinions not openly sanctioned by Richard Edgeworth), then it is possible that the text would be downplayed in family records. The Edgeworths were already distrusted by their Anglo-Irish contemporaries and may not have wanted to risk increased hostility.

<sup>608</sup> The whole was completed by 1798 and published in 1800.

<sup>609</sup> Cronin 1980, 28.

But while *Castle Rackrent* bills itself as a “[tale] of other times,” at least part of the book was written in the political turmoil just prior to 1798. That, coupled with the book’s publication date of 1800—within the year of Ireland’s constitutional Union with England—makes it almost impossible to read the novel as the Preface suggests. While we are told that the “race of the Rackrents has long since been extinct in Ireland” (63), the environment that spawned the Rackrents is undoubtedly the same environment that shaped both the author’s perspectives and the character of Thady Quirk. Despite Maria’s pronouncement that the sorry Rackrent lot “are characters which could no more be met with at present in Ireland” (63), the novel is illustrative of Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century—or, as Butler suggests, a “remarkably intuitive, perceptive and far-reaching portrait of an unequal society.”<sup>610</sup>

In so stressing in the novel’s Preface the *inapplicability* of the novel’s sketches of the Rackrents to turn-of-the-century Ireland, then, the author encourages the suspicious reader to question closely all that is narrated in the pages that follow.<sup>611</sup> For Maria’s “extinct” race of unsavoury characters and her “tale of other times” arguably *do* have contemporary (that is, nineteenth-century) significance, despite the author’s apparently superficial dismissal of them. The suspicious reader cannot help but wonder how else the author has disguised her meaning with her words. It is at this time that we meet Thady Quirk, the Irish narrator who uses all those features of Irish oral-traditional narrative that are so foreign to the upper-class Englishman—exaggeration, irony, metaphor; “honest Thady” is an honest lower-class *Irishman*, not an honest upper-class *Englishman*. The Preface warns us that in becoming

<sup>610</sup> Butler 1992, 4.

<sup>611</sup> Hack puts forward a similar opinion: “Edgeworth and her father claimed to be ‘worried’ that the tale would be mistaken ‘as an up-to-date description of the Irish gentry’ (Butler 359), and despite the editorial disavowals the work apparently was widely taken as such; King George III, for example, was reported to be ‘much pleased with *Castle Rack Rent*—he rubbed his hands & said what what—I know something now of my Irish subjects.” Leaving aside the question of just what it was the king thought he now knew...., I want to suggest that *Castle Rackrent* actually invites such a reading of the tale as a contemporary portrait, even while disavowing it. For the editor protests too much” (Hack 1996, 152, citing Butler 1972). The author’s purposeful (mis)use of tense furthers the ambiguity of her political statement: “First [in the Preface] we learn that ‘the present generation *is* amused ... by the ridicule that is thrown upon their ancestors,’ then that Ireland ‘*will* look back with a smile of good-humoured complacency’; first that ‘the race of the Rackrents has long since been extinct in Ireland,’ but then that it is the not-yet achieved union with Great Britain that will put them securely in the realm of ‘former existence.’... Is ‘the present age,’ one is left wondering, Monday morning or Saturday? Is *Castle Rackrent* a ‘tale of other times’ or the tail-end of other times?” (Hack 1996, 152-53).

Thady's audience, we will be spun an Irish tale, which, though told in idiomatic English, follows the rules of a wholly different cultural language: "In effect, the narrative structure is carefully organized, the vernacular medium plays a significant part in this organization, and the 'tale' has political purposes which the organized text seeks to serve."<sup>612</sup>

### The dubious Thady Quirk

[F]idelity, like sincerity, is a quality we tend to admire  
regardless of its object or occasion.

– Eagleton 1995, 162

We are told by the fictional Editor that Thady Quirk has been "persuaded" to recount the Rackrent family history, the retainer's "feelings for *'the honour of the family'*, as he expressed himself, [having] prevailed over his habitual laziness" (63). We can believe the honesty of Thady's "plain, unvarnished tale," the Editor assures us, precisely because it lacks the refinement of the "highly ornamented narrative" penned by the consummate literary biographer: "[w]here we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us; and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sacrificed to the rounding of a period, the pointing of an antithesis" (62). The implication is that the "illiterate old steward" (62) clearly does not have "the power," and that therefore (we are encouraged to assume as a logical course) it is most unlikely that he has "the will" to deceive us. We are thus encouraged to trust the Editor's professional assessment of Thady's simple soul and listen to the ensuing narrative with the same indulgent air.

Like the *Odyssey*, however, *Castle Rackrent* tells two tales in one. The first tale is the innocent account introduced by the Editor—a tale about the sort of unsavoury Irish landlordism that is, thankfully, no more. In the second, the *seemingly* guileless and ignorant Thady Quirk actually relates a rather subversive and revolutionary account. Moreover, in a manner more in keeping with that of a king who dictates

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<sup>612</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 71.

events to his court scribe, Thady somehow contrives to ensure that the supposedly authoritative and sophisticated Editor records the narrative in writing, *in Thady's own words*. The Editor, for his part, believes fully that it is *he* who has persuaded a reluctant, naturally lazy and presumably bashful illiterate to recount an innocent “tale of other times.” Within the second-tale framework, however, the Editor’s perspective is victim to Thady’s subversive machinations—after all, how much more convincing the tale of an “illiterate old steward” if it must be coaxed from his simple, modest soul!

There is considerable evidence to support a more suspicious reading of the novel than it initially received by its intended audience.<sup>613</sup> First, it is difficult (if not impossible) to take the Editor’s observations at face value. If we do, then Thady Quirk is an idiot, paying tribute to a family that clearly does not deserve his loyalty, for in the same breath that he professes his admiration and loyalty to the Rackrents, he presents a dismal litany of their shortcomings. Yet there is ample evidence throughout the rest of the narrative to suggest that, far from being an idiot, Thady is a shrewd observer of human character, with a keen wit and a fine-tuned ability to cloak his merciless display of the Rackrents’ dirty laundry beneath the seemingly disjointed ramblings of a simple-minded old fool.

Yet if we conclude that the Editor’s observations are incorrect, and that Thady is *not* an idiot, other possible interpretations of the Editor’s preliminary caution are also problematic. Either the seemingly pedantic and authoritative Editor is blind and obtuse, taken in by an “illiterate old steward” of no account (while at the same time exposing his own gullibility and over-inflated sense of self-worth), or the Editor is not taken in at all, which must mean instead that he is aware of, even perhaps complicit in, Thady’s deception. If we accept the first of these two possibilities, then what the Editor calls Thady’s “plain, unvarnished tale,” which would have been believable, were Thady an idiot, precisely because of its lack of refinement, suddenly takes on all the sinister possibilities of the “highly ornamented narrative.” Now, it is Thady who has the ability to deceive—to deceive a sophisticated literary

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<sup>613</sup> It seems to have been widely interpreted as a contemporary description of the Irish population and Irish custom; see, for example, the comments of George III, above.

authority, even! And if the “simple” Thady so easily deceives the authoritative Editor, then perhaps he also sets out to deceive the reader, who is uncomfortably aware that she represents the same sort of pedantic literary audience that Thady finds in the Editor—an audience that he clearly takes pleasure in exploiting. If we accept this interpretation, then every word that Thady “dictates” to the Editor becomes highly suspect, as are the Editor’s glib pronouncements about Thady’s character and intelligence and even the meanings the Editor attributes to Irish idiom and custom. The Editor is no longer a reliable guide to native Ireland; rather, he—and all that he represents—begins to look much like the pathetic target of Thady’s duplicity.

If, on the other hand, the Editor is *not* taken in by Thady’s presentation, then we must entertain the possibility that the Editor’s role is part of the deception—for it is in part the Editor’s authoritative pronouncements about Thady’s character, and his firm editorial direction in the Preface, the Notes and the Glossary, that sustain the credibility of Thady’s narrative, which is rather thin and incredible without the authoritative stamp of editorial approval. But if that is the case, then the Editor is not the reader’s friend; rather, he aids Thady’s subterfuge by persuasively declaring such subterfuge to be impossible given Thady’s simple, loyal soul.<sup>614</sup> He does not speak to the reader with transparent and honourable intentions of presenting “*An Hibernian Tale taken from facts and from the manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782.*”<sup>615</sup> We can no longer trust that these are indeed “tales from other times” or that “the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age” (63). We cannot even trust the Editor’s characterization of Thady Quirk as “an illiterate old steward,” with the implications of inferiority that the subject of Irish illiteracy holds for literate, colonial England. Is the “illiterate” Thady really as unsophisticated and naïve as the term and its usage by the Editor imply? Even Thady’s “partiality to *the family*, in which he was bred and born” (62) needs to be re-examined: Which “family” is meant? Is Thady truly loyal to the Rackrents? Or is he loyal to the Quirks, presumably the family in which he was “bred and born,” and

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<sup>614</sup> After all, we have been fairly warned of the likelihood of “literary manufacture” in the “highly ornamented narrative” by a man with the power and the will to deceive. Susan Glover (2002), too, highlights the possible duplicity of the editor (see 297-98).

<sup>615</sup> As the subtitle assures us.

which family, it could be argued, Thady's actions throughout the novel best serve to benefit?<sup>616</sup> The reader begins to understand that her onetime guide is not only an unreliable informant but perhaps even an untrustworthy one. Where the reader may initially have thought she chuckled along with the Editor about Thady's simplicity (and the comparative simplicity of the native-Irish population generally), she is now uncomfortably aware of the possibility that the joke is really on *her* instead, and that the Editor and Thady (and, perhaps, the native-Irish population generally) collude with each other in their mass deception of a "literate" reading public that is woefully ill equipped to "read" the native Irish cultural "text."

Through Thady we meet the illustrious Rackrent heirs: First, the ever-popular Sir Patrick ("the whole country rang with his praises!"<sup>617</sup>), ever the consummate yet indiscriminating host ("He had his house, from one year's end to another, as full of company as ever it could hold, and fuller," putting up the overflow "in the chicken-house, which Sir Patrick had fitted up for the purpose of accommodating his friends and the public in general"<sup>618</sup>). A drunkard from a young age ("I remember when I was a little boy, the first bumper of claret [my father] gave me after dinner, how he praised me for carrying it so steady to my mouth"<sup>619</sup>) and the self-proclaimed inventor of raspberry whiskey ("which is very likely, as nobody has ever appeared to dispute it with him, and as there still exists a broken punch-bowl at Castle Rackrent, in the garret, with an inscription to that effect"<sup>620</sup>), Sir Patrick and his accomplishments are memorialized in marble in the family chapel "with the compliment so justly due, that 'Sir Patrick Rackrent lived and died a monument of old Irish hospitality.'"<sup>621</sup> True to form, Sir Patrick's death follows a heavy bout of drinking, and his body is seized for debt during the funeral.<sup>622</sup>

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<sup>616</sup> See, e.g., Glover (2002), who points to the same ambiguity: "The use of italics to foreground 'the family' and the subsequent reference to the Rackrents lead us to assume that these signifiers have the same referent, but as we shall see it is not entirely clear to which family—the Rackrents, or the Quirks (the one 'in which he was bred and born')—Thady's partiality is directed" (298).

<sup>617</sup> Edgeworth, 67.

<sup>618</sup> Edgeworth, 66-67.

<sup>619</sup> Edgeworth, 67.

<sup>620</sup> Edgeworth, 67.

<sup>621</sup> Edgeworth, 68.

<sup>622</sup> Edgeworth, 68.

Sir Patrick is succeeded by Sir Murtagh, whom we first meet at Sir Patrick's funeral as the heir who convinces the angry mob not to rescue the late lord's body from the debt collectors "for fear of consequences, seeing that those villains who came to serve acted under the disguise of the law." Yet Murtagh's real motivations are soon clear: "on account of this affront to the body, [Sir Murtagh] refused to pay a shilling of the debts, in which he was countenanced by all the best gentlemen of property." Thady openly scoffs at the rumour (yet still takes pains to include the details of it in his narrative) that Murtagh's motives were anything less than principled: "It was whispered (but none but the enemies of the family believe it), that this was all a sham seizure to get quit of the debts, which he had bound himself to pay in honour."<sup>623</sup> Murtagh himself will soon do his part to bankrupt the Rackrent estate, engaging in costly land suits ("He used to boast that he had a lawsuit for every letter in the alphabet"<sup>624</sup>) that do not pay for themselves:

He was a very learned man in the law, and had the character of it; but how it was I can't tell, these suits that he carried cost him a power of money; in the end he sold some hundred a year of the family estate; but he was a very learned man in the law, and I know nothing of the matter, except having a great regard for the family; and I could not help grieving when he sent me to post up notices of the sale of the fee-simple of the lands and appurtenances of Timoleague. 'I know, honest Thady,' says he, to comfort me, 'what I'm about better than you do.'<sup>625</sup>

If we read *Castle Rackrent* "against the grain" for evidence of a hidden transcript of resistance, this paragraph is particularly indicative of Thady's well-concealed "everyday" resistance to the status quo. Using Scott's hidden-transcripts model, it is difficult to read Thady's insistence in his own "ignorance" of the law and of Sir Murtagh's "learning" of it as anything but ironic, especially when Thady later displays an exceedingly sophisticated understanding of the law for someone who has assured us he "knows nothing of the matter." The discrepancy is so blatant that the Editor feels the need to explain:

The English reader may perhaps be surprised at the extent of Thady's legal knowledge, and at the fluency with which he pours forth legal terms; but almost every poor man in Ireland, be he farmer, weaver, shopkeeper, or

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<sup>623</sup> Edgeworth, 68.

<sup>624</sup> Edgeworth, 70.

<sup>625</sup> Edgeworth, 70.

steward, is, beside his other occupations, occasionally a lawyer. The nature of processes, ejections, custodians, injunctions, replevins, &c. is perfectly known to them, and the terms as familiar to them as to any attorney. They all love law. It is a kind of lottery, in which every man, staking his own wit or cunning against his neighbour's property, feels that he has little to lose, and much to gain.<sup>626</sup>

Later Thady attributes Sir Murtagh's untimely death<sup>627</sup> indirectly to his digging up a fairy-mount, "against my advice," pointing out that, "[t]hough a learned man in the law, he was a little too incredulous in other matters." He has already undermined our faith in Murtagh's legal capabilities; now he suggests—without saying so directly—that Sir Murtagh lacked worldly wisdom as well—wisdom that Thady demonstrates in abundance. Thady's passing remark that things happened "for the best to be sure" should also alert the reader to the possibility that Thady's true loyalties lie elsewhere.

Sir Murtagh is succeeded by the diabolical Sir Kit, an accomplished womanizer who nevertheless, Thady assures us, had "the spirit of a prince" and the love of all who knew him. The ever-charming "prince" marries a Jewish heiress, his eye rather more on her wealth than on anything else. According to Thady, when the couple arrives at Castle Rackrent, "His honour spoke never a word, nor so much as handed her up the steps." She, too, had little to say, was "little better than a blackamoor, and seemed crippled," although Thady allows that "that was only sitting so long in the chariot"<sup>628, 629</sup> When the new Lady Rackrent refuses to hand over her jewels, Sir Kit

<sup>626</sup> Edgeworth, 133.

<sup>627</sup> He bursts a blood vessel during an argument over money with his equally miserly wife, one of the heiresses of "the great Skinflint estate" (68).

<sup>628</sup> Edgeworth, 76.

<sup>629</sup> Thady injects here an aside that serves to further fuel the "second tale" model. He professes to be profoundly disturbed about the arrival of Sir Kit's new bride, and what this might mean for the future of the Rackrent estate: "Mercy upon his honour's poor soul, thought I; what will become of him and his, and all of us, with his heretic blackamoor at the head of the Castle Rackrent estate!" He then claims "never [to have] slept a wink all night for thinking of it; but before the servants I put my pipe in my mouth, and kept my mind to myself"—a statement that he immediately contradicts in the next sentence, admitting that, actually, he was quite happy to "put [his] best foot foremost" and tell any "strange gentlemen's servants came to the house" whatever sensational gossip he could devise about the new Lady Rackrent, "[passing] her for a nabob ... which accounted for her dark complexion and every thing." In this light, and in light of the fact that Thady has, over the course of the past few pages, conspired with his son to ensure that Jason is appointed Sir Kit's account keeper, his "concern" about the future of the Rackrent estate seems disingenuous. Indeed, his actions now seem

has her locked away in a tower room, where she remains imprisoned for seven years while Sir Kit continues to throw parties and toast her health. While she is locked away, Sir Kit carries on romantic relationships with (at least) three other women, until his indiscretions are discovered by the women's brothers and he is fatally wounded by one of them in a duel—a duel he calls upon himself, saying “in his defence ... [that] he would meet any man who dared to question his conduct.” Such is the ignoble death of a prince.

The final Rackrent successor, Sir Conolly (Condy) Rackrent, is from “a remote branch of the family” and inherits the estate only because Sir Kit has no heirs of his own. Yet despite Condy's distant connections to the Rackrents, Thady early on fills the young boy's head with “stories of the family, and the blood from which he was sprung, and how he might look forward, if the *then* present man should die without childer, to being the head of the Castle Rackrent estate.”<sup>630</sup>

It is clear from the outset, however, that Condy lacks ambition<sup>631</sup> and has little charisma. True to form, Thady provides us with a rather negative portrait in the guise of sympathetic supporter<sup>632</sup>: “Born to little or no fortune of his own, he was bred to the bar; at which, having many friends to push him, and no mean natural abilities of his own, he doubtless would, in process of time, if he could have borne the drudgery of that study, have been rapidly made king's counsel, at the least; but things were disposed of otherwise, and he never went the circuit but twice, and then made no figure for want of a fee, and being unable to speak in public.”<sup>633</sup> Though only distantly related to the previous Rackrents, Sir Condy nevertheless exhibits distinct family traits: he delights in entertaining, and while he is “yet but a slip of a boy” he goes out “a-shooting” with Sir Kit's own huntsman, becoming “well

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even opportunistic, designed to fan the flames of whatever misfortune Sir Kit has called upon himself.

<sup>630</sup> Edgeworth, 85. We know already from the frequency with which Thady “overhears” conversations that he has a habit of listening at doors. Who else would have been in a better position to predict the unlikelihood of any children from any of the Rackrent unions?

<sup>631</sup> Unless it might be said that he shows ambition by not applying himself at his studies when he sees that his chances of inheriting the estate are significant: “seeing how Sir Kit and the Jewish lived together, and that there was no one between him and the Castle Rackrent estate, he neglected to apply to the law as much as was expected of him.” (Edgeworth, 86)

<sup>632</sup> In the manner of the wit who remarks “Ahh, he would have been so brilliant had he any brains!”

<sup>633</sup> Edgeworth, 85.

acquainted and popular amongst the poor in the neighbourhood early; for there was not a cabin at which he had not stopped some morning or other, along with the huntsman, to drink a glass of burnt whiskey out of an eggshell, to do him good and warm his heart, and drive the cold out of his stomach."<sup>634</sup> He also demonstrates the legendary Rackrent financial acumen: "He could not command a penny of his first year's income; which, and keeping no accounts, and the great sight of company he did, with many other causes too numerous to mention, was the origin of his distresses."<sup>635</sup>

Condy's ineptitude opens doors for young Jason Quirk, a fact not lost on Thady, who tells us that Condy "went to a little grammar-school with many others, and my son amongst the rest, who was in his class, and not a little useful to him in his book learning, which he acknowledged with gratitude ever after."<sup>636</sup> Despite Thady's vehement professions of loyalty to Sir Condy, and his frequent equally fervent condemnations of his son's ruthless business decisions (undertaken by Jason ostensibly to remedy Sir Condy's failing finances, but clearly engineered to aid in Condy's eventual bankruptcy), Thady's actions often seem to set the stage for Jason Quirk's eventual takeover of Condy's business affairs. For example, it is "my son Jason," "now established agent, who knew everything," who finds a temporary solution to Sir Condy's financial woes: he rents "a bargain of some acres" from Condy "at a reasonable rent" and then promptly lets it to under-tenants, lining his own pockets with a comfortable profit.<sup>637</sup>

When it comes to women, Condy fares no better than his forebears: He waffles between his very real fondness for Judy M'Quirk, Thady's niece, and his obligation to Miss Isabella Moneygawl, a wealthy young woman whom he has led on but for whom he feels no great affection. One evening, "unsteadied by all the whiskey punch he had taken," yet encouraged by Thady, who otherwise sees as slim any chances that the poor Judy M'Quirk will ever be the next Lady Rackrent, he decides between the two women on the toss of a coin. Such is the solemnity of the occasion

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<sup>634</sup> Edgeworth, 86.

<sup>635</sup> Edgeworth, 86.

<sup>636</sup> Edgeworth, 85.

<sup>637</sup> Edgeworth, 86-87.

that Condy swears a “terrible oath” to abide by the result of the coin toss and ask the lucky winner to marry him. Once more, however, the details Thady provides undermine his demonstration of sympathy for the hapless Sir Condy, for the “terrible oath” he swears is upon Thady’s ballad book, which he mistakes for a prayer book. Thus, his gallant declaration—“it’s come to a toss-up with me, and I’ll stand or fall by the toss”—is reduced to a comedy: his “oath” is meaningless, and he enters into his unfortunate marriage to Isabella Moneygawl on the basis of a promise made in a drunken fog.

It is worth noting that Thady, often so quick to defend his favourite Sir Condy, “ever his white-headed boy,” does not here point out to him his mistake with the ballad book. Instead, he defends the honour of a man who keeps his vows: “Now, though as easy a man, you would think, as any in the wide world, there was no such thing as making him unsay one of these sort of vows, which he had learned to reverence when young” (89-90). The Editor, too, reiterates the point: “It has been maliciously and unjustly hinted, that the lower classes of the people in Ireland pay but little regard to oaths; yet it is certain that some oaths have great power over their minds.” Yet Thady then credits *himself* with instilling in Condy such a respect for vows, “teaching him to toss up for bog-berries on my knee” (90). His mention of the ballad book, coupled with his revelation about a childhood game—likening a toss-up for bog-berries to a toss-up for a wife—suggest that Thady himself sees the entire oath-taking incident as ridiculous. Why would he allow the future of his niece to be determined in such a frivolous manner? It is possible that Thady simply realises Judy has nothing to lose from a coin toss, as it is almost certain that Isabella Moneygawl will be the next Lady Rackrent. He takes advantage of Condy’s inebriation and his love of gambling (so easily cloaked as a noble sense of honour) to create one last opportunity for Judy M’Quirk.<sup>638</sup>

Sir Condy dies in much the same manner as Sir Patrick, after a fever brought on by a drinking bout. At his death, he is destitute, having long ago signed the estate

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<sup>638</sup> This interpretation is similar to that of James Newcomer, who also understands the “calculating mind of Thady” as making a “final ploy” to help Judy become the next mistress of the Rackrent estate. It is not Thady’s fault that the gamble fails to pay off by advancing a Quirk to the position of mistress of the estate (Newcomer 1967, 147).

over to Jason. Condy's estranged wife Isabella and Thady's son, "immediately after my poor master's death, set about going to law about that jointure." Yet for the first time, Thady seems truly beaten by events, perhaps aware that, whether the Rackrent estate is in the hands of a Moneygawl, a Rackrent or a Quirk, the end result is the same: "I'm tired of wishing for any thing in the world, after all I've seen in it—but I'll say nothing; it would be a folly to be getting myself ill-will in my old age."

*Reading Thady: The ambiguity of the text*

A suspicious reading of *Castle Rackrent* hinges on our reading of the character of Thady Quirk. Arguably, Thady's critics fall into two camps.<sup>639</sup> There are those, like Elizabeth Harden, who view Thady's self-presentation as genuine: "For Thady's great appeal lies in his simple charm and unconscious naiveté, made possible by the artistic device of 'transparency'—the ironic presentation of external fact in such a manner that the reader may see the truth underneath the external statement and draw his own conclusions."<sup>640</sup> James Newcomer, on the other hand, sees Thady as "artful rather than artless, unsentimental rather than sentimental, shrewd rather than obtuse, clear-headed rather than confused, calculating rather than trusting." This Thady takes advantage of circumstances and manipulates events to aid in his son's acquisition of the Rackrent estate, all while he professes innocence, ignorance and loyalty to a family he betrays. While an untrustworthy narrator makes for a less comfortable read, as we must now be suspicious of everything Thady tells us, "now we have to feel a degree of admiration for him."<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Or, as (Cronin 1980, 27) more cynically observes: "The commentators agree on Thady's central importance but they agree on little else."

<sup>640</sup> Harden 1987, 91.

<sup>641</sup> Newcomer 1967, 151.

The Harden argument is the traditional one,<sup>642</sup> but as Newcomer himself points out, this fact could be seen as “something of a measure of [Edgeworth’s] achievement that her novel should have been enjoyed and praised without readers’ recognizing the full dimensions of its central character.”<sup>643</sup> Certainly, Newcomer’s reading of Thady makes for a more complex reading of *Castle Rackrent* as a text that cloaks subversive political intentions. I also argue, however, that aside from the convenient conjunction between Newcomer’s argument and a reading of *Castle Rackrent* that incorporates James Scott’s hidden-transcripts model, a calculating Thady Quirk is suggested by internal clues in the novel itself, and by the Edgeworth family history.<sup>644</sup>

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<sup>642</sup> As Glover (2002, 299) points out, “Critical loyalty to Thady is firmly entrenched, and Newcomer’s analysis was roundly, if not convincingly, condemned.” Newcomer writes: “Faithful Thady! the old family retainer—generations of readers have taken these words at their face value, pleased with the character as they think Miss Edgeworth created it, satisfied aesthetically, perceiving no more and asking no more than they perceive” (1967, 151). Neill (2001, 78) argues that “the complex ironies that result from Thady’s masquerade of servility have not been recognized as often as they should be: until recently, indeed, the dominant tendency has been to identify him as an essentially innocent figure, a loyal retainer and naive admirer of the family whose ‘honour’ he endlessly professes to guard, and whose ‘friendship’ he pathetically treasures.”

<sup>643</sup> Newcomer 1967, 151.

<sup>644</sup> There are, of course, scholars who disagree with Newcomer’s interpretation particularly. Hollingworth argues that the fact Thady speaks in the vernacular supports the characterization of Thady as an innocent observer: “the vernacular” as a concept in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain is proof positive of the user’s naïveté, his simple-mindedness. Thady “joins a venerable literary tradition” in which “dialect-speaking countrymen come to the new industrial towns to stare in wonder at the steam engines and impressive new buildings, or to be tricked by the local prostitutes,” and “their vernacular voice guarantees to the audience that they will not understand the significance of what they describe” (99). (It is important not to overemphasize the importance of the vernacular in the book, however, as Thady’s language is not as different as the editorial apparatus implies: “while Edgeworth does learn to speak in Thady’s voice, this voice is not *other than*, but is rather *a version of*, her own. In deciding not to ‘translate the language of Thady into plain English’ . . . , she ‘forgets’ that Thady is already speaking English (if not ‘plain’ English), although of course it is precisely the legibility of Thady’s tale in its original form that allows Edgeworth to preserve its ‘authenticity’” [Newcomer 1967, 155-56]). Alan Warner suggests that it is “wrong to interpret Thady as a calculating fifth-columnist” as this interpretation depends on the reader’s hindsight given the history of Ireland *after* 1798, and is “at odds with the general tone and texture of the book.” Rather, the “ambiguity and inconsistency in Thady . . . is part of his character as Maria Edgeworth sees it. In her brief epilogue she calls attention to the mixture of qualities in the Irish character” (47). Brookes argues that we misunderstand Thady because we misread the nature of the text itself. *Castle Rackrent* is not a novel, and we should not expect its characters to act or speak the way characters in other novels might act or speak: the narrative rules are different. If we understand *Castle Rackrent* as an apologue, we avoid “seeing certain qualities of the book, such as inconsistencies in the representation of Thady and the episodic nature of the narrative, as weaknesses in it.” According to Brookes, Newcomer’s reading “is the sort of explanation encouraged by a misperception of the form of the tale and by a misunderstanding of the principles operating within it” (Brookes 1977, 600-601). The text is “not history, not a psychological case study, not a work which by its form demands empirical verification” (602); rather, Edgeworth’s “intention is to shape our attitudes and beliefs toward what

Traditionally, Thady Quirk has been interpreted much as the fictional editor in the narrative tells the reader to interpret him: “Faithful Thady! the old family retainer—generations of readers have taken these words at their face value, pleased with the character as they think Miss Edgeworth created it, satisfied aesthetically, perceiving no more and asking no more than they perceive.”<sup>645</sup> Yet as Glover remarks, “Maria Edgeworth’s own generalizations on the shrewdness of the ‘lower Irish’” would indicate that any straight reading of “honest Thady” can only be suspect. Glover illustrates her point with a quotation from Edgeworth’s *Memoirs*, where the novelist writes that “there is no deceiving [the lower Irish] as to the state of the real feelings of their superiors.”<sup>646</sup> James Newcomer goes one step further, implying that Edgeworth’s clever concealment of this part of Thady’s character is one of the main points of the text: “It is something of a measure of her achievement that her novel should have been enjoyed and praised without readers’ recognizing the full dimensions of its central character.”<sup>647</sup> If this is the case, then every statement that Thady makes that would *seem* to support the “real feelings” of his superiors (i.e., that he is foolish, gullible, unsophisticated, blindly loyal to those who treat him ill) must be read with suspicion: *Why* would Thady speak and act in a manner that upholds the low opinion his superiors have of him? Of what value to him is acting the fool? James Newcomer uses a number of textual examples to argue support that Thady Quirk narrates a calculating and purposeful account, using the guise of foolishness to tell a tale that might not otherwise be told—or, at least, not told in the manner he wishes it to be told. In this light, the Editor’s assertion that Thady narrates the tale “in his own words” takes on new meaning: while on one hand the Editor assures us that Thady’s “own words,” though lacking in the literary artifice of a more sophisticated author, can be trusted as part of a “plain, unvarnished tale,” on the other hand Newcomer would argue that Thady’s “own words” are designed to effect a particular outcome—and therefore are exactly that sort of literary artifice

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we perceive as fictional men in fictional situations and to urge us to make the same judgment of actual men in actual situations” (601). Thady will fulfill our expectations as a character in a novel “only up to the point at which those features interfere with exemplification of [Edgeworth’s] central attitudes” (602).

<sup>645</sup> Newcomer 1967, 151.

<sup>646</sup> Glover 2002, 303.

<sup>647</sup> Newcomer 1967, 151.

that the Editor assures us they are not.<sup>648</sup> Even if we do not accept that Thady deliberately calculates to undermine the narrative he tells, argues Newcomer, we “should at least be skeptical of the ingenuousness and the loyalty that appear to be Thady’s characteristics. If he is simple, he has the native shrewdness that may sometimes be the companion of simplicity; if he is loyal to the family, that loyalty is made somewhat more comfortable by the perquisites that have accompanied his service.”<sup>649</sup>

First, argues Newcomer, it is inconceivable that, as a member of the very community so negatively affected by the tradition of “rackrenting” landlordism that has plagued the Irish lower-classes since the penal restrictions were first implemented, Thady “could not in all reason witness the suffering that came from affliction and present that affliction in such revealing detail without meaning to render judgment.”<sup>650</sup> Rather, the fact that he presents it at all—let alone in startling detail—is judgment in and of itself. He uses the guise of simplemindedness to conceal his disingenuousness; in truth he is sympathetic to the peasants and critical of the masters. A more accurate characterization of Thady can be found “reflected, as in an imperfect mirror,” in his “crafty” and “grasping” son Jason, who controls the Rackrent estate by the end of the novel: “of course in the reflection [Thady’s] simplicity has become sophistication and [Thady’s] faithfulness, self-serving.”<sup>651</sup>

Second, Newcomer points out that Edgeworth and “faithful” Thady’s true intentions can be discerned in the passive-aggressive role the latter plays in the success of his son Jason: “In no other connection do Thady’s actions so much belie the easy conception of him as the ignorant, faithful retainer.”<sup>652</sup> He manipulates his close relationship with Sir Condy to his son’s advantage, and while he “may not have planned that Jason displace the Rackrents, ... the groundwork that Thady lays

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<sup>648</sup> In his “Mantles, Quirks, and Irish Bulls: Ironic Guise and Colonial Subjectivity in Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*” (2001), Neill highlights Edgeworth’s veiled allusion to Shakespeare as an indication of Edgeworth’s true narrative intentions: “The imaginary editor’s smugly condescending reference to Thady’s performance as ‘a plain unvarnished tale’ ... is, of course, another pointer to Edgeworth’s ironic method, since the phrase derives from Othello’s description of his highly sophisticated and artfully ornamented traveller’s tales” (82-83n31).

<sup>649</sup> Newcomer 1967, 144.

<sup>650</sup> Newcomer 1967, 145-46.

<sup>651</sup> Newcomer 1967, 144.

<sup>652</sup> Newcomer 1967, 147.

makes it possible for Jason to seize the opportunities that come his way.”<sup>653</sup> Despite his professed distaste for the manner in which Jason does business with the Rackrents, Thady refers to him as “my son” or “my son Jason” more than thirty times,<sup>654</sup> lets on that he has been privy to Condy and Jason’s private correspondence, and allies himself with Jason by using the pronoun “us” in referring to a bid on the sale of Rackrent property.<sup>655</sup> Reasons Newcomer, “One would suppose, if Thady is as loyal to the family and as disapproving of Jason as he declares himself to be, that he would not emphasize the father-son relationship, especially in those instances when Jason is marking off the steps toward the Rackrents’ ruin. But it is precisely in those instances that Thady speaks of ‘my son Jason.’”<sup>656</sup> Newcomer does not deny the possibility that Thady holds some real affection for his Rackrent employers and allows that “the grief at Sir Condy’s demise may be real.” But “at every step toward Jason’s acquisition of the whole estate, his father Thady aids and abets ... there is no doubt that [any grief Thady feels at Sir Condy’s death] is greatly meliorated by the possession of the land and buildings and money that had once belonged to the Rackrents.”<sup>657</sup>

The skill with which Thady manipulates people (Sir Condy, the fictional Editor, even the contemporary reader) is testament to Edgeworth’s skill as a storyteller:

So impressive—so seemingly obvious—is the simplicity of *Castle Rackrent* that the evidence of a sophisticated structure, when we discover it, comes as a surprise. No less are we surprised by the calculating mischievousness of Thady Quirk, who for well over a century and a half now has been praised as the example of the unthinking, loyal family retainer. As the construction of the novel is submerged in an atmosphere that pervades all the action and lingers in

<sup>653</sup> Newcomer 1967, 147.

<sup>654</sup> Newcomer 1987, 78-81.

<sup>655</sup> “When Jason puts in for the possession of a valuable lease, ‘I spoke a good word for my son,’ Thady says, ‘and gave out in the country that nobody need bid against us.’ (IV, 12) Note the word *us*—inadvertent on Thady’s part if we would keep him in character, but surely deliberate on the part of Miss Edgeworth” (Newcomer 1967, 148).

<sup>656</sup> Newcomer 1967, 148.

<sup>657</sup> Newcomer 1967, 162. Cochran (2001, 30) disagrees, charging that “Newcomer’s argument seems as limited as those presented by critics who accept Thady’s loyalty at face value, and also flawed in its implication that Thady takes an active role in bringing about the ruin of the Rackrents.” Cochran suggests that Thady’s natural resentment of Anglo-Irish rule explain the feeling of alliance and satisfaction when Jason takes over the Rackrent estate, but that Thady remains a passive observer, not a participant. I find myself siding with Newcomer: Thady may not have had an active role in planning the events that lead to the Rackrents’ downfall, but when offered the opportunity to nudge circumstances in a particular direction, Thady’s actions suggest where his true loyalties lie.

the memory, so the complicated dimensions of Thady's character are blended into this superficial characterization as the loyal Rackrent servant. The irony that is inherent in the art by which the novel was composed is matched by the irony of the fact that praise has been posited on nonexistent qualities.<sup>658</sup>

Edgeworth's Thady is not a simple soul. Instead, he is representative of the subordinate in a colonized Ireland. This subaltern does not acquiesce—far from it: “The true Thady reflects intellect and power in the afflicted Irish peasant, who in generations to come will revolt and revolt again.”<sup>659</sup>

Newcomer's argument is deepened and extended by the arguments of others, summarized by Michael Neill (2001). Cóilin Owens looks at parallels between the ironies that abound in *Rackrent* and the mocking tone of the Irish bull, a form of humour in which the speaker takes on “the appearance of ignorance, philistinism, or servility, as the [occasion] demands.”<sup>660</sup> Tom Dunne sees Thady as a post-colonial Caliban “in the guise of a quaint stage-Irish Ariel, his devious and false servility a direct product of the colonial system, and destined, through his crucial aid for his son, to be its nemesis.”<sup>661</sup> Robert Tracy agrees to some extent with the Caliban comparison, but argues that *Castle Rackrent* must be read “in two different ways: as the account of a loyal servant, [and] as the account of a servant who is actually master.”<sup>662</sup> Edgeworth's invention of Thady Quirk is an intentional examination of the process of surreptitious resistance whereby “the colonized subject simultaneously feigns loyalty, manipulates his rulers, and subverts their control.”<sup>663</sup> Eagleton sees Thady's use of language as part of his disguise, where both “truth and artifice are ... interwoven in his discourse”<sup>664</sup>; this enables him—like all “victims of colonization”—to conceal his true feelings behind a “mask of servility”<sup>665</sup>:

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<sup>658</sup> Newcomer 1967, 153.

<sup>659</sup> Newcomer 1967, 151.

<sup>660</sup> Neill (2001, 80), citing C. Owens, “Irish Bulls in *Castle Rackrent*,” in C. Owens, ed., *Family Chronicles: Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent*, 70-78 (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1987): 74.

<sup>661</sup> Neill (2001, 80), citing T. Dunne, *Maria Edgeworth and the Colonial Mind*, O'Donnell Lecture (Dublin 1985), 7.

<sup>662</sup> Neill (2001, 80), citing R. Tracy, “The Cracked Lookingglass of a Servant: Inventing the Colonial Novel,” in *The Unappeasable Host: Studies in Irish Identities* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 9-24: 11.

<sup>663</sup> Neill (2001, 80), citing Tracy, *The Unappeasable Host*, 17.

<sup>664</sup> Eagleton 1995, 162.

<sup>665</sup> Eagleton 1995, 165, cited in Neill 2001, 81.

Language is strategic for the oppressed, but representational for their rulers. To tell one's superiors only what you think they want to hear, or only what you judge they should know, is at once defiance and disrespect, collusion and resistance.<sup>666, 667</sup>

Hack (1996) suggests that when the Editor warns the reader that "tales" are not always benign he is actually giving the reader permission to read a politically dissident meaning into Thady's narrative: "Far from being scandalous or transgressive, a reading that recognizes the possibility of subversiveness is solicited by the text."<sup>668</sup> Yet the artistry of Edgeworth's writing is in the ambiguity of the message. Ultimately, we cannot prove that Thady's intentions are subversive: "the text does not *ascribe* duplicity as an *essence* but rather makes it possible to *suspect* duplicity as a *tactic*. It does not make it possible to conclude that such duplicity is at work, and thus does not preclude the possibility of assimilation."<sup>669, 670</sup>

Cochran (2001) applies a postcolonial paradigm in his examination of Thady, arguing that earlier analyses "underestimate [his] character and motivations."<sup>671</sup> It is clear even from his introductory lines that "[Thady's] words and his intent do not

<sup>666</sup> Eagleton 1995, 165, cited in Neill 2001, 81.

<sup>667</sup> The *Rackrent* narrative calls to mind other master-servant narratives with which Edgeworth would have been familiar, for example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Part 1, 1605; Part 2, 1615).

<sup>668</sup> Hack 1996, 159.

<sup>669</sup> Hack 1996, 159.

<sup>670</sup> It could be argued that any suspicion of subversion on the part of the reader reveals the reader's political leanings: She who sees subversion is in all likelihood subversive herself. Edgeworth has perhaps created a tale that applies the same principles used by the weaver-tricksters in the Hans Christian Anderson classic "The Emperor's New Clothes." In Anderson's tale, two charlatans posing as weavers offer to make a suit of new clothes for the emperor of a material so extraordinary that it is invisible to anyone who is not fit for his position or who is hopelessly stupid. When the two tricksters finish the new clothes, the emperor does not wish to admit he can not see the material, and calls for a procession through town in his new "suit." None of the emperor's courtiers wishes to admit he can not see the suit, so they all help the emperor "dress" and march with him through town. None of the townspeople wishes to admit he can not see the suit, so they all make appropriate sounds of admiration. Not until an innocent child shouts, "But he hasn't got anything on!" do the townspeople and the courtiers and the emperor realise that there *is no suit*, simply a very naked emperor. Arguably, Thady's narrative is very like the emperor's new clothes. Thady tells us he is loyal to the Rackrents and his language suggests that he defers to an audience that is far more sophisticated than he. The Editor tells us that Thady is loyal to the Rackrents and relates to the reader as if to a social equal. If a reader argues that Thady is *not* loyal to the Rackrents, he risks exposing himself as closer in his thinking to Thady than to the Editor, denying the social status that both Thady and the Editor have conferred upon him, and likening himself on some level to the rebellious peasant. One imagines that we need only an innocent to shout the equivalent of "But he hasn't got anything on!" in order for us to safely admit seeing Thady's calculating and subversive character.

<sup>671</sup> Cochran 2001, 59.

correspond.”<sup>672</sup> The narrator begins: “Having out of friendship for the family, upon whose estate, praised be Heaven! I and mine have lived rent free time out of mind, voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family, I think it my duty to say a few words, in the first place, concerning myself.”<sup>673</sup> Cochran points out that in the context of tenant farming in Ireland at the time, Catholic-Protestant relations left Catholic farmers with little freedom: “living rent-free was a kind of slavery”: “Thady therefore praises Heaven for the many years he and his family have served the Rackrents as slaves.” Cochran also reassesses Thady’s claim that friendship is his motivation for telling the Rackrent history, pointing out that when Thady’s “friendship” is “considered against the manifold unflattering tales he tells about the inebriated Sir Patrick, the litigious Sir Murtagh, the wild Sir Kit, and the dull Sir Condy, as well as his deprecatory descriptions of their wives, Thady seems not so friendly.” Cochran also argues that though the story focuses almost solely on the Rackrents, it *begins* with a few words about the narrator himself, “making clear to the reader that [Thady] is both the center and the shaper of his story.”<sup>674</sup>

Cochran invokes John Cronin’s argument that Thady’s ambivalence is best explained if we understand *Castle Rackrent* as a slave narrative and Edgeworth as its conscious and deliberate director.<sup>675</sup> According to Cronin, “A close reading of the novel will find Thady neither ingenuous nor malign. What Maria Edgeworth has given us in this, her greatest achievement in the realm of characterisation, is a magnificently realised slave, a terrifying vision of the results of colonial misrule. There must have been a moment of clearly deliberate artistic decision in which she realised that what needed to be said must be said through one of the submerged

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<sup>672</sup> Cochran 2001, 62.

<sup>673</sup> Edgeworth, 65.

<sup>674</sup> Cochran 2001, 61-62. Glover (2002, 300) discusses Neill’s (2001) argument that even the etymology of the name Quirk/M’Quirk suggests the use of “verbal tricks, subtlety, and evasion.”

<sup>675</sup> *Castle Rackrent* is perhaps more accurately classified as a “neoslave” narrative, defined by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy in the *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*: “Having fictional slave characters as narrators, subjects, or ancestral presences, the neo-slave narratives’ major unifying feature is that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences” (see *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 533).

people.”<sup>676</sup> Cochran argues that slave narrators typically adopt a sympathetic narrative stance:

This humble posture helped slave narrators—and their “editors”—to present a narrative that recounted slavery’s atrocities without becoming confrontational and which underscored the individuality of the slave in terms of courage and learning without ignoring the continuing horror of slavery. Such a narrative posture would ultimately become so endearing to the reader that he would feel sympathy for both the individual narrator as well as for the abolitionist campaign.<sup>677</sup>

In a typical slave narrative, the slave narrator tells the story of his oppression—he does not necessarily defy it, or even object to it within the parameters of the narrative itself. Instead, details are recounted “without significant editorial commentary [in order] to bring the reader to a seemingly solitary point of outraged sympathy for the narrator. The slave narrator is thus presented as a survivor, but also as a victim of slavery.”<sup>678</sup> Though the slave narrator tells his own story, the narrative does not “empower” him: “indeed, the narrator’s assumed posture of supplication to his readership presents him as powerless over both his own past as well as over a future abolition of slavery.” Thady’s role “as slave narrator mandates that he shapes the story and that his experiences within the oppression dictate the story, but the focus on his passive observations largely absents him from the action of the narrative.”<sup>679</sup> Cochran compares Edgeworth’s role as educator of an “ignorant” English readership to that of American editors of black-slave narratives designed to instruct a northern audience: she “mediates the narrative with an editorial presence, ... establishes complex characterizations of both the peasantry and the Ascendancy class in the figures of Thady and Sir Condry, and ... advocates a revised treatment of the English-ruled tenant system in Ireland.” Though she is variously labeled as an apologist and an abolitionist, Cochran argues that she is neither. Rather, she is “a reformist of a system that she understands to be profoundly flawed and unfair.” Her tactics are “ultimately more effective in conveying her reservations about the Ascendancy” than they might have been in another form, as her use of “the often

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<sup>676</sup> Cronin 1980, 36.

<sup>677</sup> Cochran 2001, 59.

<sup>678</sup> Cochran 2001, 60-61.

<sup>679</sup> Cochran 2001, 61.

comic voice of one of its oppressed” is “less directly confrontational” to an English audience.<sup>680</sup>

### **Hidden transcripts and coded messages in *Castle Rackrent***

Maria Edgeworth and her father both demonstrate an interest in coded messages, and the ease with which text and other communication methods could be used to conceal information from one audience while it was being passed on to another. In 1795, Richard Lovell Edgeworth offered the Dublin government the use of his “tellograph,” an invention that enabled him to convey a coded message successfully from Scotland to Ireland<sup>681</sup>; Maria wrote the paper that he delivered on 27 June 1795 to the Royal Irish Academy, entitled “A Secret and Swift Messenger.”<sup>682</sup> The original intent was to improve worldwide communications; the invention was to be coupled with the publication and distribution of a codebook. Yet according to Edgeworth biographer Marilyn Butler (2001), Richard Lovell Edgeworth was “less concerned with the simple mechanics of his invention than with the utility and symbolic significance of a universal sign-language.” But he was aware, writes Butler, that military (and revolutionary) interest in such a device would likely focus on its potential to ensure secrecy rather than on its potential to promote universality: “books and a freely circulating press, such as that achieved by the United Irishmen, provided opportunities for passing secret messages as well as information.”<sup>683</sup>

Much of Maria Edgeworth’s Irish writing reflects her ideas on nationhood and national identity. Butler suggests that to Edgeworth, a nation’s group identity was founded on “its shared experiences, as these have been passed down in history and story over time: in sharing land, particularly a land with well-defined borders such as an island, and in sharing a language, with all that that implies of popular literature in

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<sup>680</sup> Cochran 2001, 57-58.

<sup>681</sup> The project had been tackled previously by various seventeenth-century European thinkers, including John Wilkins, Fontenelle and Leibnitz. Edgeworth’s invention was never used by Dublin—perhaps because Edgeworth’s loyalties were at times suspect both in County Longford and in the capital (see Butler 2001, 275).

<sup>682</sup> The full title used on publication was “An Essay on the Art of Conveying Secret and Swift Intelligence.”

<sup>683</sup> Butler 2001, 275.

its many genres, written and oral.”<sup>684</sup> Inevitably, these shared experiences included the need to relay information in such a way as to not attract unwanted attention: “Hidden and double messages became a feature of [Edgeworth’s] Irish writing,” which abounds in “riddles, obscure hints, and allusions to underground networking.”<sup>685</sup>

With this in mind, we can resurrect the three-principle model discussed in earlier chapters. Previously we argued that a transcript of resistance might be concealed by patterns in diction or syntax, or by the narrative or textual design of the written piece. It may also be obscured by the inclusion of diversionary tactics, or “red herring” details in the written text. In *Castle Rackrent* we find evidence of all three principles of disguise, although these appear in form quite different from that in either tractate Avodah Zarah or Homer’s *Odyssey*. We should expect to find differences, as all three pieces are illustrative of distinct oral-traditional environments and therefore, using Foley’s words, oral-traditional languages. Yet the similarities between the first two texts and *Castle Rackrent*’s manner and method of disguise are significant and intriguing.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the key to understanding how Homer conceals Penelope’s expression of resistance is in recognizing that Homer tells two different stories about two different versions of Penelope. In *Castle Rackrent*, too, the key to revealing hidden resistance and subversion is in recognizing that Thady tells two tales in one. The first tale is the “factual” narrative, wherein we take Thady at face value, and presume that he means exactly what he says. We can trust this narrative, the fictional Editor assures us, because it is told by a simple, illiterate narrator who lacks guile, and whose simplistic tale demonstrates to the more sophisticated, literate reader the dogged, misplaced loyalties of a devoted butler and the sordid truth of the Rackrent family character, “which could no more be met with at present in Ireland.”<sup>686</sup> The English reader can feel pity for, and perhaps a desire to protect, the ignorant simpleton; he can feel relief that such Rackrents no longer live in *his* English

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<sup>684</sup> Butler 2001, 288.

<sup>685</sup> Butler 2001, 276. Indeed, Edgeworth’s *Irish Bulls* suggests that the Irish bull itself is a type of cultural encoding, often used to disguise hidden or double meaning.

<sup>686</sup> Edgeworth, 63.

colonies; he can feel confident that the social differences between the Rackrent family and his own are great enough that the narrative does not implicate *him* in any way. The second tale, however, imparts an underlying truth only to those readers who understand the narrative style that Thady uses—a native Irish one—in which all things are not as they seem, in which irony abounds, and in which the very shrewd Thady tells the reader exactly what he thinks of the Rackrent family—*provided the reader is “literate” in the narrative language that Thady is using.* In this second narrative, the simple, innocent and ignorant Irishman is not at all simple, far from innocent, and dangerously knowledgeable about the imperial order that “subjects” him. In this tale, a “world turned upside-down” vision of Irish history, the illiterate, ignorant subordinate dominates his oppressor by virtue of, ironically, his cultural literacy, that is, *what he knows*: Thady is clearly fluent in two social “languages,” where the Editor is clearly not.<sup>687</sup> Thus, he satisfies the Editor and his English audience with a sad tale of Rackrent history, while the second tale hidden beneath the surface of the first narrative speaks particularly to those members of Thady’s audience who understand the oral-narrative language that Thady uses, and that the underlying meaning of the tale he tells has little to do with the “facts” the Editor records. Part of the reason the disguise works so extraordinarily well is that arguably both narratives are true. Thady *is* the subservient, loyal retainer to the Rackrent family, but he *is also* a shrewd and manipulative orchestrator of the Rackrents’ downfall.

How can Thady be both subordinate *and* dominant? In answer, we return to subaltern scholar Homi K. Bhabha’s observation about the nature of the dominant/subordinate relationship, namely, that a desire to subvert the agenda of one’s oppressor cannot be equated with one’s desire to cease being subordinate. For a slave must at some level retain his perspective as a slave in order to fully appreciate the success of his subversive tactics, or, as O’Hanlon suggests, he must “stand in two places” in order to satisfy that part of himself that needs to witness the

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<sup>687</sup> One could argue that he who recognizes the power of writing and text to effect particular communication (whether he himself is literate or not), and takes pains to learn the rules of such communicative modes, is potentially better able to control the processes of information-sharing than a literate individual who underestimates the value of non-literate expression, and thus potentially wields a greater power than one who is text-literate but not “orally literate.”

inversion of social power.<sup>688</sup> Following this line of argument, Thady must retain his subaltern perspective in order to appreciate the reversal that occurs by the end of the novel; that is, the reversal would not be complete *unless* his role as Rackrent family retainer, in itself “a kind of slavery,”<sup>689</sup> had been fully experienced. Thus, he *is* “honest Thady” the loyal manservant, but he *is also* the duplicitous and untrustworthy native Irishman that the Englishman traditionally fears. Distinguishing where the “honest Thady” leaves off and the duplicitous Thady begins is almost impossible, as the two aspects of his personality are inextricably intertwined:

Thady, after all, as his mantle reminds us, is a man under cover, and like any undercover agent his success must depend in part on his ability to interiorize the very values he works so hard to undo. In the split consciousness that results it is perfectly possible for feelings of genuine affection and respect to coexist with much more hostile and subversive attitudes; indeed I take it to be axiomatic to the success of performances like Thady’s that his positive emotions towards his masters are, at some level, quite real; and that their simultaneous fraudulence is often not apparent (because not consciously articulated) even to himself.<sup>690</sup>

In the section that follows, I lay out possible hidden transcripts of resistance in *Castle Rackrent*, using the three-principle model laid out in previous chapters. I do not here argue for a particular subversive interpretation of *Castle Rackrent*, but rather, demonstrate the possibility that resistance to a dominant group or ideology may be concealed in the text according to the three principles I have identified. When the resistance we seek is of the “everyday” variety (i.e., not overt revolution or rebellion), we can suggest the usefulness of a suspicious reading of text for an indication of subversive dialogue, but ultimately, it is difficult to argue definitively

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<sup>688</sup> See also Corbett 1983: “As Homi K. Bhabha asserts, those who subject are also subjected, for the ambivalence of colonial discourse necessarily cuts both ways: ‘it is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing within orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too.’ [13] Bhabha thus reminds us that even the colonizing Edgeworth is also a participant in ‘the process of subjectification,’ which takes place in terms of gender and class as well as race. While Edgeworth is the bearer of hegemonic English values and powers, her own authority is crosscut by at least two kinds of dependency—one having primarily to do with cultural and linguistic difference, the other regarding issues of gender” (Corbett 1994, 383, quoting Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” *Screen* 24 [6] [1983]: 25).

<sup>689</sup> Cochran, 61. See above.

<sup>690</sup> Neill, 89.

for its existence. The cleverness of the everyday resistance disguise is that it uses the cloak of honest everyday activity.

### The Three Principles of Disguise

In *Castle Rackrent* we find evidence of Principle 1, the veiling of resistance with diction and syntax, in the use throughout Thady's narrative of the Irish bull and other verbally styled "irishisms." This disguise allows Thady to hide a particular meaning behind words that technically mean something else. In many instances in the novel, truth is disguised by its exact opposite, or by a statement of extraordinary contradiction. At a very basic level, the elements that we generally understand to convey meaning in any text—namely, the written words themselves—are used in *Castle Rackrent* to conceal meaning. The literary *textus* of the novel obscures an oral "subtext"—a nuance that is not appreciated unless the audience is aware of the oral-traditional language being used.

Principle 2, cloaking subversive meaning in textual structure, is evident in Edgeworth's use of editorial apparatuses. The Preface, the Glossary, the Notes, the use of an Editor—in most texts, these additions suggest an authority, an insight and an objectivity above and beyond what the core text can offer the audience.<sup>691</sup> In *Castle Rackrent*, however, just as written words convey an opposite (orally derived) meaning, the application of these (textually derived) editorial apparatuses convey the very opposite of what they might mean in a wholly textual setting. Viewed in light of the fact that Thady's words have already been used to conceal subversive

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<sup>691</sup> This formal editorial "carapace" (Hollingworth 1997, 100) was encouraged by Richard Edgeworth and added later, hurriedly in the autumn prior to publication (it is not always clear how much influence Edgeworth's father had on her Irish novels, or if he helped write some of the editorial material in *Castle Rackrent*—that is, the Preface, the Notes and the Glossary; see Hollingworth 1997 [102] and Butler's [1972] discussion on the Edgeworth partnership, especially 271-398). Because of this, "there is a temptation to look on them as afterthoughts, irrelevant to the narrative" (Hollingworth 1997, 99). Yet Hollingworth argues that the haste with which these parts were added "may actually be a sign of their importance. If the rush to publication occurred in the context of the urgency of the Union debate, it can be argued that the formal additions were seen as indispensable features of the text" (100). He continues: "The Notes and Glossary ... act to promote *Castle Rackrent* from the position of fictional narrative to that of sociological document ... By such treatment the narrative text is legitimized. The comic triviality of the provincial tale is reconstituted as a document of scientific interest" (102).

meaning, Edgeworth's use of contrapuntal textual structures appears to undermine the values of a society that preferences literacy, formal schooling and English manners over native-Irish ways. While it is not wholly clear that Edgeworth sets out to deliberately mock English self-perception, it is very difficult to view the Editor as authoritative once we have argued for the application of Principle 1 as we have done above. If we determine that the words of Thady's text hide opposite or subversive meanings, and we have been fairly warned that "Where we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us; and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sanctified to the rounding of a period, or the pointing of an antithesis" (62), it would be folly to assume that the character whom Edgeworth deliberately styles as "[having] the power" and being "used to literary manufacture" would be a more transparent character than Thady himself. Consequently, any apparatus that the audience presumes the Editor to have influenced—that is, the Preface, the Notes and the Glossary, which all speak in the same self-assured, authoritative voice—must be read with scepticism. Edgeworth's artistry is in her creation of an Editor who, ironically, does not have as much power or as much skill in "literary manufacture" as the curious native Irishman whose idiom he attempts to "translate" for the "*ignorant* English reader" (63, emphasis in original). In light of Principle 1, the Editor's overconfidence here serves to underscore the fact that he himself is not aware of much of the ongoing oral subtext of Thady's narrative. While he explains peculiar or intriguing Irish idiom and custom where they are clearly introduced in the text, he neglects an analysis of Thady's narrative as a whole (that is, he fails to consider the possibility that the entire narrative is an extended Irish bull), and overlooks those parts of the text in which Thady uses irishisms less obviously.<sup>692</sup> This suggests that, despite his pedantic tone, the Editor is oblivious to much of the wit behind Thady's words.

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<sup>692</sup> Consider, for example, the Editor's discussion regarding a "mode of rhetoric common in Ireland," in which "an astonishing assertion is made in the beginning of a sentence, which ceases to be in the least surprising, when you hear the qualifying explanation that follows" (129). The example the Editor uses in his discussion is that of a man who, though obviously drunk, swears he hasn't touched a drop "of anything, good or bad, since morning at-all-at-all, but half a pint of whisky." It is clear from the Editor's discussion that the man in the example knows he is drunk, and the Editor *knows* that he knows, and that the man's denial of his drunkenness is really an idiomatic figure of speech. The passage that inspired the Editor's discussion is Thady's assessment of Sir Murtagh, whom Thady

In tractate Avodah Zarah and Homer's *Odyssey*, the third principle of disguise is manifested in the diversionary, red herring details that draw audience focus away from the subversive message beneath the surface *textus*.<sup>693</sup> In *Castle Rackrent*, however, the red herring that draws audience focus away from the novel's underlying hidden "transcript" is actually the use of Principle 1 as a disguise to conceal meaning. That is, in Principle 1, words are used to conceal ulterior meaning. In Principle 3, *the principle of using words to disguise meaning* is the red herring that conceals an ulterior meaning. Edgeworth uses Thady's diction and syntax (and the Editor's emphasis on Thady's diction and syntax) to draw audience attention to what Thady *says* and away from what he *does*. This enables the character to take advantage of the Rackrent family's misfortunes and misdeeds in order to help place his son in a position to take over the Rackrent estate, all while claiming his innocence and ignorance of the finer points of law and politics. Because Thady's diction and syntax mark him as an unsophisticated, uneducated native, and because the image of the uncivilized savage is such an ingrained one in the English imperial consciousness, it is possible—even easy—for the "civilized" English reader who represents Edgeworth's primary audience to overlook any of Thady's actions that do not correspond to the popular image of the uncivilized imperial subject.

*Principle 1: Words that hide meaning*

I have argued above that *Castle Rackrent* tells two tales in one. More specifically, most phrases in the novel can be read as having two meanings, one obvious and

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describes as "a learned man in the law," who never lost a single case "but seventeen." He continues: "He was a very learned man in the law and had the character of it; but how it was I can't tell, these suits that he carried cost him, a power of money; in the end he sold some hundreds a year of the family estate; but he was a very learned man in the law, and I know nothing of the matter, except having a great regard for the family" (70). Yet the Editor does not seem to apply his explanation of Thady's "rhetoric" to his analysis of Thady's observations about the Rackrent family, and throughout the novel takes at face value Thady's statements about his admiration of the Rackrents, his loyalty to the household, and his professions of simple ignorance.

<sup>693</sup> For example, in Avodah Zarah, the narrative details of the rabbis' arrests or the minutiae of *halacha* serve to draw reader attention away from the manner in which the Talmud is presented, that is, the preservation of conflicting opinions—which we have argued earlier is one of the key "hidden messages" of the Talmud. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the details of the typical "recognition scene," in which Penelope uses the ruse of the marriage bed to reveal Odysseus' true identity serves to mask the fact that, given the way Homer has structured the narrative, the fate of Ithaca rests ultimately in Penelope's hands—making a woman the most powerful character in the kingdom.

straightforward meaning, and one less obvious, subsurface meaning, sometimes perceptible only when read within the cultural context of Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century. The first example of this double entendre is the novel's title itself. Rackrent is the surname of the family who owns the Rackrent estate; "Castle Rackrent" is the name of the family manor. Yet "Rackrenting" is also the term given to a style of landlordism in early modern Ireland in which the landlord did not occupy the lands he owned, but exacted rent (often at high rates) on peasants who worked the land in his absence. The rent was collected by a middle man and then sent on to the landlord abroad. This absolved the landlord from having any personal relationship with his renters or with the local community, while reaping the benefits of landownership. Rackrenting frequently resulted in the deterioration of the Irish estate and tenant buildings (if the landlord chose not to spend money on the upkeep of the house and grounds of an estate he did not inhabit) and dissatisfaction among his tenants. Thus, "Castle Rackrent" is suggestive of its owners' character as well as their name. In this way, the title of Edgeworth's novel hints at the double narrative to come.

a) *Thady's name*

After the novel's title, one of the first clues we are given that all may not be as it seems is the narrator's introduction of himself. Thady announces that his "real name" is Thady Quirk, but then gives himself a host of other nicknames: "though in the family I have always been known by no other than "*honest Thady*"—afterwards, in the time of Sir Murtagh, deceased, I remember to hear them calling me "*old Thady*"; and now I'm come to "poor Thady"<sup>694</sup> Michael Neill summarizes the difficulty with this sort of beginning: One who introduces himself as "honest" up front is bound "to invite the suspicion of dishonesty."<sup>695</sup> And sure enough, "the absurd contradiction between the claim that in the family he has '*always* been known by *no other* name than "*honest Thady*"", and the immediate admission of two rival sobriquets, is the kind of Irish bull that instantly exposes his 'honesty' itself to

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<sup>694</sup> Edgeworth, 65.

<sup>695</sup> Neill 2001, 86-87.

comic scepticism.”<sup>696</sup> Moreover, the Irish name Thady is an Anglicization of the Gaelic “Tadhg,” which becomes “Teague,” which was “a stock name for the sentimentally loyal Irish servant of stage comedy, and (as it still is today) an insulting Protestant term for the treacherous Irish papist.”<sup>697</sup>

Thady’s surname confirms the impression given by his first. At the time Edgeworth was writing, the meaning of “quirk” would most commonly have been “a verbal trick, subtlety, shift or evasion; a quibble, quibbling argument’ or the employment of such quirks and quibbling (*OED* n., 1a-b).” Neill concludes that the name “Quirk” hints at “those crafty and cunning ‘shifts’ ... [seen] as the characteristic technique of Irish subversion—or to the mode of evasive double-speak which ironic readings discover in the pious protestations of Thady.”<sup>698</sup> The fact that quirks were often understood to refer to the “sleight-of-tongue proverbially attributed to the legal profession” heightens the tension in the relationship between the Quirks and the Rackrents: “to identify [Thady’s] son—the agent whose sharp legal practice progressively strips the Rackrents first of their lands and then of their house itself, and whom the novel leaves entangled in a last vicious suit for the possession of the dowager Lady Rackrent’s jointure—as ‘attorney Quirk’ is to employ a kind of satiric redundancy.”<sup>699</sup>

#### b) Thady’s “greatcoat”

Thady wears his long greatcoat “winter and summer.” He tells us “it holds on by a single button round my neck, cloak fashion,” and “as I never put my arms into the sleeves; they are as good as new.”<sup>700</sup> The Editor informs us that “The cloak, or mantle, as described by Thady, is of high antiquity,” and cites Spenser’s *View of the State of Ireland*, in which are discussed the greatcoat’s many uses:

for it is a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief. First, the outlaw being, for his many crimes and villanies, banished from

<sup>696</sup> Neill 2001, 86. Arguably, the name “honest Thady” draws attention to the idea of two tales in one. Though Thady does not strictly lie, he tells two very different truths. Neill reminds us here that one of the most notorious characters in literary history, Shakespeare’s Iago, was also described as “honest.”

<sup>697</sup> Neill 2001, 87.

<sup>698</sup> Neill 2001, 87-88.

<sup>699</sup> Neill 2001, 88.

<sup>700</sup> Edgeworth, 65.

the towns and houses of honest men, and wandering in waste places, far from danger of law, maketh his mantle his house, and under it covereth himself from the wrath of Heaven, from the offence of the earth, and from the sight of men. When it raineth, it is his penthouse; when it bloweth, it is his tent; when it freezeth, it is his tabernacle. In summer he can wear it loose; in winter he can wrap it close; at all times he can use it; never heavy, never cumbersome. Likewise for a rebel it is as serviceable; for in this war that he maketh (if at least it deserves the name of war), when he still flieth from his foe ... waiting for advantages, it is his bed, yea, and almost his household stuff.<sup>701</sup>

The fictional Editor does not seem to draw any parallels between “honest Thady” and the cast of characters who wear Spenser’s greatcoat; any connections between Thady’s greatcoat and Thady’s possible subversion must be made by the suspicious reader. But as Neill points out, “given the mantle’s history, it would be difficult to take the footnote as an innocent piece of antiquarianism.”<sup>702</sup> Glover notes that the words “cloak” and “mantle” can be used as verbs in the sense of to conceal or obscure, and that these allusions should highlight the possibility of “competing voices in the text.”<sup>703</sup> Egenolf places the greatcoat more firmly in Irish Rebellion history, citing the eighteenth-century private journal of Irish Quaker author Mary Leadbeater, who notes that a friend who was a loyalist officer travelled safely “disguised in a round hat and great-coat over his regimentals.”<sup>704</sup> Egenolf also points out that in Edgeworth’s *Ennui* (1809), her only fictional work to directly address events of the Rebellion, a greatcoat plays a key role in the discovery of a rebel plot. These sorts of parallels should “[alert] us to the potential of Thady’s complicity in conspiracies to overthrow the Anglo-Irish landholders because the *Castle Rackrent* note about the potentially subversive great coat is, after all, about *his* great coat.”<sup>705</sup>

*c) Thady’s rhetoric—the Irish bull and other “irishisms”*

In the Preface, the Editor notes that “Where we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us; and those who are used to

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<sup>701</sup> Edgeworth, 65-66n.

<sup>702</sup> Neill 2001, 85.

<sup>703</sup> Glover 2002, 306.

<sup>704</sup> Egenolf 2005, 853, citing Mary Leadbeater’s “Account” in John Beatty’s *Protestant Women’s Narratives* (1862): 34.

<sup>705</sup> Egenolf 2005, 853.

literary manufacture know how much is often sanctified to the rounding of a period, or the pointing of an antithesis" (62). In writing this, Maria Edgeworth invites the "ignorant English reader" to see past Thady's simplemindedness. At the same time, however, it is possible to read Edgeworth's words as a warning: despite his illiteracy, Thady has "the power" to deceive as well, for the manipulation of words and meaning is not the exclusive domain of the literate. *Castle Rackrent* is styled essentially along oral-traditional lines; the rhetorical rules it follows reflect this.<sup>706</sup>

In this light, Thady's rhetorical style arguably conceals from the fictional Editor (and, as history has demonstrated, a significant portion of his literate audience) the Irishman's true opinions of the Rackrent family and the underlying motivations for his actions. He uses a distinctly Irish oral style, known for its colourful hyperbole, its fantastic claims and its flamboyant analogies, which conceals a less flattering representation of the Rackrent family and a more subversive interpretation of his narrative. Thus, while it is possible to read Thady's memoir as a nostalgic reflection of the simple, uneducated peasant, it is also possible to read it as the narrative of one who *uses the guise of a simple, uneducated peasant* to relate a tale with a very different message.

For example, we know that Thady is a man who prefers not to do unnecessary work. First, he begins his narrative on "Monday morning." The Glossary informs us that all new projects are begun by the native Irish on Monday morning: "all the intermediate days, between the making of [excuses] and the ensuing Monday, are wasted: and when Monday morning comes, it is ten to one that the business is deferred to *the next* Monday morning" (123, emphasis in original). Second, Thady "walks slow and hates a bustle" (72), and his pipe and his solitude are cherished companions: "I had no one to talk to and if it had not been for my pipe and tobacco, should, I verily believe, have broke my heart for poor Sir Murtagh" (72). The "ignorant English reader," for whom the editorial apparatus of the novel is ostensibly created, may understand this shirking of duties to be examples of Thady's

<sup>706</sup> Cronin (1980, 30) writes of this passage, "The whole ... bristles with calculated innuendo and is written entirely tongue-in-cheek. Nothing could be clearer than that this 'plain unvarnished tale' will indeed be 'the most highly ornamented narrative' .... we are being offered a most carefully calculated piece of literary artifice ... *Castle Rackrent* is an intensely self-conscious piece of subtle fictional contriving."

laziness. Yet if we understand Thady's character as subversive rather than loyal (or as subversive *despite* his loyalty), then another reading of his "laziness" is possible. His ironic tone instead belies his contempt for the family and his practical good sense. Why begin a new project at the end of the week when one's time could be spent more enjoyably with pipe and tobacco? More to the point, why "bustle" to begin a new project for a family for whom you have little respect, and who, doubtless, will put you to work sooner or later anyway?<sup>707</sup> Throughout this ambiguous, two-tiered insight into his character—is Thady lazy, or is he practical? Or is he both?—we are constantly reminded (by the Glossary, and by Thady's frequent references to his own illiteracy and lack of education) that *Thady is not writing the narrative himself*: he is having someone else write the story *for* him. He dictates the story—not unlike one who dictates a memorandum to a scribe—to an educated, upper-class Anglo-Irish Editor. He could have chosen to dictate the story to "my son Jason," who is both literate and educated, but he does not. Instead, he has chosen to dictate his tale to someone a) who is not a member of the lower classes, and b) who is most capable of telling the tale to the greatest number of non-native-Irish and non-lower-class people. In this reading of Thady, the Editor's own marginalia underscore the fact that Thady's disguise has been so successful that the Editor himself is not even aware of the role he plays in the subterfuge.

In another example of double-layered narrative, Thady openly professes loyalty to and admiration for his employers. This is in keeping with expectations common in imperial England, that the unsophisticated lower-class subjects of the imperial order are grateful to those wealthier and powerful civilizing forces that undertake to "improve" them, and that a peasant's naïveté can lead to misplaced admiration and loyalty. Thady also peppers his narrative with references to native-Irish fairies and folklore. This supports imperial England's stereotype of the native Irish peasant as uneducated and superstitious. Yet a suspicious reading of Thady's professions of loyalty, his use of Irish rhetorical style and his references to Irish folklore suggests

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<sup>707</sup> On beginning a new project at the end of the week, Chuilleanáin (1996) adds: "The Editor's impatience is that of an employer irritated by the resistance of the Irish worker; the reader is assumed to belong to the same class and thus to share his exasperation. But the employer's power over his laborers is simultaneously called into question by the absurdity of beginning work on the *last* day of the week and the tyranny of the authority that demands it" (28).

that such statements serve merely to disguise his real opinions, which are mocking and disdainful rather than admiring. Though he refers to Sir Murtagh as a “learned man in the law,” he then describes how many suits the man has lost and the extent of his debt due to his obsession with legal wrangling. And though Murtagh is “a learned man in the law, he was a little too incredulous in other matters” and dies soon after he has the bad judgment to dig up a fairy-mount. To one audience, Thady’s declaration of Murtagh’s expertise followed by his discussion of Murtagh’s incompetencies attests to the unsophisticated peasant’s misplaced loyalty and admiration of wealthy men in positions of power. To an audience familiar with Thady’s oral-traditional narrative style, however, Thady’s commentary dismisses Sir Murtagh’s “learning”<sup>708</sup> and, moreover, implies that there is wisdom in peasant superstition and a certain poetic justice in Sir Murtagh’s ignominious end.<sup>709</sup>

Later, Thady describes Sir Kit’s response to the brothers of three women who are angling to become the next Mistress Rackrent—while Sir Kit’s first wife is locked away in a room in the family home. Thady begins with a seemingly deferential introduction: “Upon this, as upon all former occasions, [Sir Kit] had the voice of the country with him, on account of the great spirit and propriety he acted with” (81). But then:

He met and shot the first lady’s brother; the next day he called out the second, who had a wooden leg; and their place of meeting by appointment in a new ploughed field, the wooden-leg man stuck fast in it. Sir Kit, seeing the situation, with great candour fired the pistol over his head; upon which the seconds interposed, and convinced the parties there had been a slight misunderstanding between them; thereupon they shook hands cordially, and went home to dinner together. This gentleman, to show the world how they

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<sup>708</sup> Despite his professed ignorance, elsewhere in the novel Thady demonstrates a shrewd understanding of legal matters.

<sup>709</sup> Egenolf (2005, 856) notes another important relationship between Irish folklore and resistance: “terms such as “fairies,” “sprites,” and “brownies” had entered into native parlance as terms loaded with the weight of insurgent and militia activity. To level a fairy-mount is not only to risk the displeasure of the “good people,” but also to destroy a potential lookout and warning station essential to protect the “natives of Ireland” from invaders [Edgeworth 129]. As Edgeworth almost certainly knew, one need look no further back than 1798 to hear of this system of warning in active use. This military use of fairy-mounts opens onto a controversial sociohistorical landscape that resonates with contemporary fears of a native uprising or an invasion of Ireland by the French.” Arguably, by relating the tale of Sir Murtagh’s ill-advised actions, Thady (and Edgeworth) invokes the spirit of these connotations. If a fairy-mount is symbolic of resistance and subversion of the dominant order, then Sir Murtagh’s death *following his destruction of a fairy-mount* takes on a more sinister quality.

stood together, and by the advice of the friends of both parties, to re-establish his sister's injured reputation, went out with Sir Kit as his second, and carried his message next day to the last of his adversaries. (81)

As the narrative progresses and Sir Kit is exposed as a scoundrel, the suspicious reader reflects on the credibility of Thady's initial introduction. If "upon all former occasions" Sir Kit has acted with similar "spirit" and "propriety," and if he "had the voice of the country with him," then either Thady is, indeed, a simpleton, or we must admit the possibility that Thady's introduction is derisive rather than deferential and that his contempt may extend beyond the Rackrents to other upper-class representatives of the country, namely, its English conquerors and its Anglo-Irish government.

*Principle 2: structure that hides meaning*

In [*Castle Rackrent*], two language features are evident—the informal oral code narrative of Thady Quirk and the contrasting formal written code editorial apparatus which surrounds it. Neither of these modes of discourse is used innocently, and both interact to serve the intentions of the text.

– Hollingworth 1997, 87

Susan Glover (2002) has noted that there has been relatively little study done on the rhetorical function of footnotes in narratives.<sup>710</sup> If we consider the editorial apparatuses in *Castle Rackrent* in light of their rhetorical function, we can argue that they serve as a *literary* disguise of an *oral* hidden transcript: The footnotes and the glossary conceal Thady's true intentions. The "language features" that Hollingworth recognizes in the text create a structural framework that serves to mask any subversive ideas that Thady (or Edgeworth) might express.

The use of editorial devices immediately suggests to a text-literate audience two things: first, it confers upon the editorial material (and its writer) the authority of expertise; second, it implies that the human subject of the editorial commentary is less authoritative and less sophisticated than the author of the editorial material himself. The use of editorial apparatuses in *Castle Rackrent* automatically suggests to the reader that Thady's narrative is uncultured and suspect and in need of expert

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<sup>710</sup> Glover 2002, 306.

explication. In this interpretation, Thady's narrative is not suspect because it conceals something subversive but, rather, because it is too simple for the sophisticated reader to understand without adequate editorial guidance by an expert accustomed to dealing with uncivilized cultural subjects such as Thady Quirk. The "authority" conferred on the fictional Editor by Edgeworth's use of the editorial devices serves to disguise the fact that, where Thady's oral-traditional story-telling style is concerned, Thady is the authority and the Editor is the illiterate. The structure of the narrative thus serves to conceal any potentially subversive ideas: The Editor—our supposedly expert guide—is not expert in the oral-traditional language Thady is using and will not be able to perceive the meaning hidden by any oral-traditional narrative structures.

John Cronin's (1980) observations help to extend this argument. Cronin notes that the linguistic "otherness" of the native Irish population created anxiety amongst Anglo-Irish leaders, and that this anxiety is reflected in Anglo-Irish novels of the time, which "nearly always [come] to us with [their] footnotes or afternotes packed with details of regional explication."<sup>711</sup> These editorial devices confirm the "deficiency" of the native-Irish other, and at the same time explain the other to an Anglo-Irish audience. Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* is an early example of this type of explicative fiction; any subversion inherent in Thady's narrative is hidden by the structure of the novel itself.

*Principle 3: The red herring*

Thady is pigeon-holed as simple by the fictional Editor, but when we read between the lines it is clear that Thady is anything but a simple character. He is conflicted in his feelings for the Rackrent family and torn in his loyalty between the family he has served and the family he has sired. He professes to be pained by the poor treatment of Sir Condy by Jason,<sup>712</sup> but still encourages Jason's ambitions. And while his

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<sup>711</sup> Cronin 1980, 11.

<sup>712</sup> For example: "'Oh, Jason! Jason! How will you stand to this in the face of the county and all who know you?' says I; 'and what will people think and say, when they see you living here in Castle Rackrent, and the lawful owner turned out of the seat of his ancestors, without a cabin to put his head into, or so much as a potato to eat?' Jason, whilst I was saying this, and a great deal more, made me

affection for the Rackrents seems genuine, it does not stop him from airing the family's dirtiest linens. Yet traditionally Thady has most often been judged at face value by what he *says* as a loyal family retainer rather than by what he *does*, which ultimately serves to aid in the fall of the Rackrent family and the takeover of the estate by Jason Quirk. Thady's language draws our attention away from the discrepancies between his words and his actions. I argue, however, that not only do Thady's diction and syntax hide subversive meaning, as outlined in the discussion of Principle 1 above, but *the fact that Thady uses a particular vernacular* also conceals subversive meaning. Arguably, we see evidence of the third principle of disguise—the red herring that focuses audience attention elsewhere—in the fact that Thady speaks the way that he does.

Edgeworth uses Thady's language to draw attention away from his actions in two ways. First, Edgeworth has Thady speak in a vernacular immediately identifiable as that of the native Irish peasant, stereotyping him and his narrative as naive, unsophisticated, exaggerated and unreliable—all those characteristics that imperial England automatically attributed to its native Irish subject.<sup>713</sup> This is true whether we understand Thady as a character in a novel (and therefore human-like, with human emotions and reactions), or as an element within a social or political apologue (and therefore not bound by the sort of human social rules that make a character in a novel believable).<sup>714</sup> Either way, Thady's words disguise his actions by drawing our attention away from what he does.

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signs, and winks, and frowns; but I took no heed; for I was grieved and sick at heart for my poor master, and couldn't but speak" (109).

<sup>713</sup> Curiously, Edgeworth's use of the vernacular also serves to conceal another English stereotype of the native Irish, as deceitful and subversive. Yet the fact that Thady has been viewed traditionally as simple-minded would suggest that Thady's language (and perhaps the editorial apparatus) foregrounds the stereotype of the Irish simpleton over the stereotype of the Irish rebel. It also should be noted that although "identifiably Irish," Thady's brogue is by no means impossible to understand. Though there are some areas where the Editor's notes "translate" Thady's idiom, in most cases the Glossary serves as a venue for the Editor's cultural commentary, allowing the Editor to espouse authoritative opinion on matters of Irish custom and to unwittingly reveal a lack of understanding of both Irish custom and Thady Quirk. See Brian Hollingworth (1997, 87): "It is plain that ... the vernacular has been modified so that it is more easily accessible to the English reader .... [Edgeworth] is careful not to alienate her readers by making the Irish vernacular accurate but unintelligible." And from John Cronin (1980, 31): "of all celebrated Irish fictional characters, Thady is the least brogue-ridden."

<sup>714</sup> See the discussion above.

Second, Edgeworth writes the narrative in the first person. This automatically places emphasis on what is *said* by the narrator, and on the narrator's personal interpretation of events and actions—whether these are his own actions or the actions of others. The fact that the Editor also speaks in the first person further strengthens the focus on language and personal interpretation: the Editor must translate Thady's *language* for the reader; there is no suggestion that Thady's actions will have to be explained. The reader is shepherded by the rhythm of Thady's idiom and the Editor's eager translation into accepting that the events of the novel are secondary to the personal interpretation of these events. As a result, Thady is able to commit actions that oppose the first-person interpretation we are given, without any alarm bells alerting us to the discrepancy.<sup>715</sup> If we wish to query the gap between what Thady says and what he does, we must read the text against the grain, rejecting the guidance of the Editor and the implication that Thady's idiom is indicative of a simple, unsophisticated mind. This means rejecting the Western imperial vision of *other*, and—to some extent—of ourselves.

Thady's narrative style has been compared to the theatrical practice of "blacking the face" or blackface minstrelsy.<sup>716</sup> Susan Egenolf points out that at the time Edgeworth was putting the final touches on *Castle Rackrent*, widespread rebellion narratives cast the native Irish as bloodthirsty anarchists; Thady as comic narrator would have helped to "defuse the horror" of such accounts and soothe English fears of the other.<sup>717</sup> Brian Hollingworth (1997) has argued that for Edgeworth and the Anglo-Irish population, as well as for members of the English public, the "vernacular was a recognized sign of moral inferiority. The vernacular speaker

<sup>715</sup> Hollingworth (1997) would agree that Edgeworth's use of the first person suggests an ulterior motive: "It is clear ... that the first person narrative has purposes well beyond a naïve intention to record the rhythms of vernacular speech. It changes register artfully to reflect the circumstances of the plot, and to foreground certain moral attitudes" (91).

<sup>716</sup> Particularly common in America, both before and after Emancipation, "blacking the face" has a long history in the courts and on the stages of Europe. The term "blacking the face" refers to the actor's physically darkening the appearance of his skin in order to play the role of a visible minority, usually for comic effect. The term has more recently been used to describe the practice of using other visual or linguistic stereotypes in the portrayal of marginalized peoples in comedy: Susan Egenolf (2005, 848) argues that "in England's oldest colony, Ireland, dialect and language were, of course, the markers of difference, and these become the means of Edgeworth's performance in *Castle Rackrent*." Where blackface minstrelsy is concerned, of course, it is important to note that it is often "the fool" who has the most insight into his environment and those who inhabit it.

<sup>717</sup> Egenolf 2005, 847.

stopped short of civilized behaviour, and betrayed evidence of an undeveloped reasoning power.”<sup>718</sup> Edgeworth’s use of blackface, characterized by the first person and her use of a modified Irish vernacular, provides the opportunity to conceal the political intentions of the text. This is true whether we read *Thady* as innocent *or* subversive. If *Thady* is subversive, Edgeworth’s use of blackface enables the Irishman to engage in social commentary while playing the role of comedian, where the “mismatch between the medium and the message ... invites sophisticated laughter even in the gravest situations.”<sup>719</sup> If we read *Thady* as innocent, Hollingworth (1997) argues that the vernacular functions as a transparency through which readers may interpret for themselves the moral significance of situations and events. I argue that when we read *Thady* as innocent and naïve, Edgeworth’s use of blackface also potentially obscures *her own* political intentions. *Thady*’s language focuses audience attention on what *Thady* has to say, as opposed to what *Edgeworth* has to say; this enables her to make potentially bold political statements without seeming to overstep the limits of her position as a woman within a social patriarchy.

Finally, the use of the vernacular first person in juxtaposition with the editorial apparatus introduces an ambiguity between fact and fiction that once more serves to focus audience attention on the language of the text and on characters’ personal perceptions, and away from characters’ actions. Brian Hollingworth notes that, were *Thady*’s memoir unaccompanied by the editorial carapace, it would remain merely a “tale.” But the Notes and Glossary “transform *Thady*’s narrative [into a] social document, and the Preface “deliberately [confuses] such ‘factual’ documentation with the fictional mode of presentation”<sup>720</sup>: “The overall effect is to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, between social history and narrative invention, and, in effect, to pass one off as the other.”<sup>721</sup> Edgeworth’s use of the first-person vernacular is the key to this arguably intentional ambiguity:

In its transparency, [*Thady*’s] vernacular voice can expose the failings of Irish society. Yet, because of assumptions concerning regional language in both author and reader, his unconventional voice is the object of distrust and

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<sup>718</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 20.

<sup>719</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 92.

<sup>720</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 105.

<sup>721</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 106.

ridicule. He is therefore circumscribed by the dependable pen of the editor. The vulnerable vernacular is protected by the carapace of standard language, innocent orality is surrounded by the sophistication of writing, doubtful fiction is merged with dependable fact.<sup>722</sup>

### The Real Red Herring?

The text invites another interpretation, however. It is possible that Thady Quirk's entire narrative—his use of the vernacular, the interchange between Thady and the Editor, the use of the editorial carapace, the potential for Thady's account to disguise a subversive message of social resistance—is *in itself* the red herring, employed by Edgeworth, wittingly or unwittingly, to obfuscate her own conflicted opinions about the Anglo-Irish role in Ireland and a political Union with Britain. This double blind—a hidden transcript disguised by another hidden transcript—enables Edgeworth to conceal her own political critique beneath Thady's ambiguous narrative (which potentially disguises the Irishman's resistance beneath the patina of a feigned naïveté). In creating a narrator that can be interpreted on many levels, and by placing him in a context that is multifaceted and complex, Edgeworth encourages her audience to focus on the ambiguities inherent in the tale being told—that is, *Thady's tale*. While audience attention is focused on Thady's narrative, Edgeworth is able to express social and political opinions that could not otherwise be expressed openly and safely by a professed supporter of the imperial order (as the Edgeworth family was), let alone by a woman with no official political voice. The most likely hidden transcript in *Castle Rackrent* is a distinctly Anglo-Irish one:

The endless approach to and deferral of complete Union that is a cause for English anxiety helps to ensure the survival and authority of those whose identity is equally threatened by both assimilation and separation: the Anglo-Irish .... Edgeworth's project, then, is quintessentially Anglo-Irish: her novel works to install a system whereby an ongoing process of Union gives the Anglo-Irish a place and English fear of the duplicity and sheer unreadability of the Irish gives them a function. The Anglo-Irish, in short, feed off the very anxiety of empire *Castle Rackrent* feeds.<sup>723</sup>

<sup>722</sup> Hollingworth 1997, 106.

<sup>723</sup> Hack 1996, 147-48. Eagleton suggests instead that the Edgeworths supported the full-scale assimilation of the Irish, in order to avoid exactly the sort of coup by the Catholic peasantry that occurs in *Castle Rackrent*: "In the revolutionary 1790s, previously trusted family retainers suddenly

If we read the novel in this way, we can suggest that Edgeworth's primary purpose may be *to confuse* rather than to explain. By presenting an Irish character that confounds interpretation, she justifies the role played by the Anglo-Irish in occupied Ireland. In order for the Anglo-Irish to continue to function as political and cultural *liaisons* between the "ignorant English reader" and the barbarous native-Irish peasantry, the two must remain ambiguous, unknowable to each other—that is, *hidden*. Edgeworth's hidden transcript, concealed beneath the disguise of Thady's narrative, is cautionary, advising other members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency that neither a smooth political transition to a united Great Britain nor a separation of England and Ireland into distinct political entities will guarantee their social security. If the native Irish are wholly assimilated into English culture, or if the two nations break off their co-dependent dominant/subordinate relationship, then the Anglo-Irish are no longer needed in their capacity as cultural interpreters, and their usefulness—both to native Ireland and to imperial England—is thrown into question.

In this interpretation, Thady's ambiguity is a defining element in Edgeworth's subversive program: He is created by the author to be unknowable—not only to the pedantic, authoritative Editor, but to the audience as well. Even if we read the text "against the grain," we are not supposed to be able to read Thady's intentions.<sup>724</sup> Edgeworth has made him so radically indeterminate that ultimately we must acknowledge that it is not possible to know with certainty if Thady is loyal, or disloyal, or both; clever, naive, or both; cunning, disingenuous, or both. *He exists in order to confuse*. The least ambiguous line in all of *Castle Rackrent* is ultimately the Editor's statement that "Thady's idiom is incapable of translation." Indeed, it *is* incapable of translation, not because the idiom itself is impossible to render into English, but because Edgeworth has created in Thady Quirk and his narrative a symbolic representation of the gap between the English and the Irish—a gap that

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revealed their hostility to their masters; ... As with many an Irish peasant, Thady's deference is perhaps only skin-deep, resistance cloaked as complicity; and if these devious rebels are not to lay their hands on the great estates, as Jason does on Sir Condy's, then the rotten social order of the Rackrents must be superseded by the kind of full-blooded 'anglicization' of social relations in Ireland that Richard Lovell Edgeworth so efficiently practised" (165).

<sup>724</sup> Perhaps, as Brookes (1977) argues, he does not have "intention" or "motivation" in the way we presume a human character in a novel should.

must never be wholly closed if the Anglo-Irish wish to continue in their role as cultural translators. Arguably it is the Anglo-Irish who risk the greatest loss in the transition to a United Kingdom. Read this way, *Castle Rackrent* illustrates the “shifting relations of power”<sup>725</sup> that define the interaction between dominant and subordinate groups. Just as the Rackrents are left without an estate so, too, will the Anglo-Irish be left without sure footing in a united Britain. Undoubtedly, the race of the Rackrents is no more: the Protestant Anglo-Irishman who takes his social status for granted and abuses his financial privilege is gone.<sup>726</sup> In the turmoil of the last decades of the eighteenth century and the lead-up to Union with England, this Anglo-Irishman has been usurped by a native Irish population that has learned to adapt to domination and function successfully despite imperial restrictions on its freedom. Where the subordinate Irish population has adapted, however, the English population has not; this oversight threatens England’s dominance. In this scenario, Edgeworth is keenly aware of the delicacy of the Anglo-Irish predicament, caught between a subaltern nation poised to throw off the yoke of its colonial master, and an imperial state as yet unaware of the power of the peasant beneath its feet, or of the vulnerability engendered by its own obliviousness. Thady’s narrative alerts those who share Edgeworth’s concerns to reassess their position and be ready to redefine their role in the changing political landscape.

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<sup>725</sup> Corbett 1994, 383.

<sup>726</sup> As well as are those who emulate such “rackrenters,” rejecting their cultural roots for financial or political gain—as, presumably, the Rackrent family had done generations before with the O’Shaughlins’ conversion to Protestantism. It is also possible that Edgeworth criticizes here Jason Quirk, and others who, like him, also reject their roots.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Stories of great struggle appeal to our human nature. Whether we identify with the dominant power that protects innocents from anarchy, or with the underdog who fights for freedom, we find a reflection of ourselves in the battle against the Other.

Violence against the Other is frequently a catalyst for social and political change. But while history is punctuated by large-scale violent clashes between the powerful and the less powerful, the vast span of human existence is generally less eventful. For the majority of us, our daily existence is similar in broad strokes to the daily existence of most individuals hundreds of years ago. We require food, shelter and clothing. We share ideas and experiences with our contemporaries. We give birth. We raise children. We become ill. We die. We grieve. We rejoice. Only rarely does our dissatisfaction with the Other erupt in open hostility and confrontation.

Yet while overt expressions of resistance are relatively rare, we should not presume that the long periods of time between them are devoid of rebellious or subversive thoughts. Resistance comes in many forms, and changing one's social or political environment need not be the primary goal in expressing one's defiance. Revolution may be silent, and rebellion may be communicated in the most innocuous of everyday activities. Overt resistance speaks to the oppressor—"WE ARE HERE!"—and ultimately invites and expects a response from the dominant power. Hidden resistance speaks to the fellow subordinate—"Are you there?"—and is intended to attract little or no attention from the oppressor and to be understood as resistance only by likeminded individuals.

For various reasons, traditional historiography has focused on the "WE ARE HERE" of rebellion and revolution. Undoubtedly, overt rebellion is easier to recognize in the historical and archeological record than hidden transcripts of resistance: physical confrontation often leaves physical evidence.<sup>727</sup> And where

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<sup>727</sup> By "hidden transcripts of resistance" I do not mean "hidden resistance" in the sense of, for example, underground resistance movements to counter political or social oppression. I consider such resistance movements to be part of the "public transcript" of resistance in that they are not disguised as something else, and the dominant power is generally aware of their existence and purpose. The Jewish resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe, for instance, are part of the public transcript of the Second World War. Though the resistance movements were hidden or secret, in that members

singular individuals and singular events are frequently the subjects of historiography, the mundane daily activities of ordinary individuals are frequently not. Yet these mundane details offer us a deeper insight into human power relationships. The seeds of rebellion are nurtured in environments that seem on the surface to be benign. Disguised or concealed expressions of resistance by ordinary individuals are often overlooked—by the dominant group and by the historiographer—*because they look like mundane everyday activities*. Indeed, they *are* everyday activities, and thus, to the dominant Other, they are invisible. The message-sender cloaks his communication in an innocuous everyday guise in order to attract as little attention as possible from his oppressor: The “Are you there?” of a hidden transcript of resistance is designed to be understood only by those who would answer “Yes.”

James Scott argues that if we perceive overt rebellion and revolution as isolated events in human history and do not consider how resistance to oppression might be expressed during peaceful periods, inevitably our understanding of human power relationships will be distorted. Human beings express their resistance to domination in many ways, which in turn influences when and how revolution occurs. To more fully understand the dynamics of oppression, we must study the “hidden transcripts” of “everyday resistance,” for it is upon the foundation of this muted dialogue that the power relationships between dominant and subordinate populations in a particular culture are formed. While the character of these relationships influences other, perhaps louder and more insistent, expressions of resistance, it also shapes social and cultural dynamics more generally—which in turn direct the evolution of power and authority in a particular cultural environment. Scott’s model of hidden transcripts enables us to reassess the everyday actions of ordinary individuals in light of how they might be interpreted as expressions of resistance against the status quo or the dominant power within a particular community.

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took pains not to be discovered, their expression of resistance was not part of a “hidden transcript” as Scott defines the term. That is, their actions could not be construed as something other than resistance; the movements existed in order to subvert Nazi intentions and members presented themselves “publicly” (although not openly) as resistance fighters.

While Scott's model can be applied directly in modern-day anthropology, where the everyday activities of ordinary citizens can be observed and compared over time, it cannot easily be employed in the study of historical populations and events, where the observation of everyday action is not possible. I proposed that Scott's model could be used to consider how written texts might conceal a hidden transcript of resistance—by disguising subversion or opposition to the status quo as harmless or inoffensive. Further, I argued that where a text is suggestive of a highly oral-traditional environment, the key to revealing the disguise lies in the relationship between the text and its oral-traditional referents or, in the words of John Miles Foley, the text's "referential language." Those fluent in the referential language of the text—that is, the historical, cultural and social context that the language of the text serves to recall—potentially would understand the text to transmit a far more complex meaning than that suggested by the surface narrative.

To test these propositions, this investigation undertook a close analysis of three texts produced in culturally diverse oral-traditional environments. I proposed that the texts would display similarities in their potential to function as a disguise for political or social resistance in that each would suggest in predictable ways the unique *oral-cultural environment* in which it was produced. I conceived of a model to explain the process by which a text might disguise resistance according to three principles: articulation, by which a text hides secondary meaning through its use of diction and syntax; construction, by which a text incorporates hidden meaning within its narrative or textual structure; and diversion, by which a text directs the audience away from a subversive meaning by focusing attention on other elements.

### *The Limitations*

There are several limitations to the study. First, three texts is a small sample size, and I make no claims at all as to the randomness of the sample. The texts were chosen particularly because my preliminary reading suggested I would find elements that supported the model I proposed. Thus, while my choices encourage a comprehensive analysis using the three-principle model of disguise, and provide the opportunity for unique textual comparison, another study using different texts may

very well yield quite different results. However, I do not here suggest that all texts indicative of highly oral-traditional environments necessarily conceal resistance. Rather, reading particular texts “against the grain” by using the model I propose encourages the comparison of similar communication processes. These comparisons may offer us deeper insight into human power relationships and the evolution of social and political environments.

Second, I have identified and explored here only three principles of disguise; there may well be others. Additional principles might widen the field of analysis and suggest other similarities between various cultural expressions of resistance. At the same time, they might also highlight dissimilarities. Either way, the three-principle model may require modification, at the very least in substance if not in application. Yet the model proposed in this study is meant merely to open the discussion on the cross-cultural comparison of resistance and processes of communication. The goal is to encourage a broader interdisciplinary dialogue that builds on the richness and diversity of anthropological and historical detail gathered over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and on the more recent reevaluation of the relationship between oral tradition and literacy and the post-colonial exploration of subaltern agency.

Third, though I have argued here that the three texts I examine present evidence of all three principles, it is not necessary that every text that disguises resistance display all three principles of disguise (nor, perhaps, is every text even likely to do so). The model is not intended to serve as a formula but, rather, as an interpretive tool. By reading texts within the framework of the three-principle model, I hope to encourage the comparison of cultural artifacts that may seem on the surface to be relatively—perhaps even entirely—incomparable. It may be, however, that some texts—even if we suspect they conceal an underlying transcript of resistance—do not lend themselves to analysis using the three-principle model. I don’t believe this detracts from the general usefulness of the model; however, we must be open to the possibility that the model will not be applicable in some situations.

*Summary of key findings*

The study set out to test a model that would encourage the comparative analysis of texts for evidence of concealed resistance. The results of the study are suggestive and invite further exploration. In all three texts examined, it can be argued that the text conceals political and social opinions that resist or reject on some level the accepted public transcript of the text's cultural environment. It could also be argued that all three texts demonstrate evidence of oral disguise. That is, the texts use the interplay between oral and literate traditions to disguise resistance by exploiting the gap between the words and structure of the literary text and the oral-traditional language of a particular environment, whether this environment is that of the author or the text's characters.

If multiple meanings may be layered onto a textual framework, then opportunity exists for subsurface—or subtextual—content. Conceivably, an author could transmit ideas on a metaphorical bandwidth, with the intention that they be picked up only by those with the right “receiver,” that is, the means to decipher the signals encoded within the textual framework. Decoding a hidden transcript of resistance in a text requires a certain degree of fluency in the code, where “the code” is a referential language that recalls the cultural context of both the sender and the receiver. Thus, decoding the hidden transcript requires a degree of insight into the referential social and cultural environment. One who lacks this insight and fluency—whether that individual is a contemporary or later observer—risks missing veiled subtextual meaning.

Conceivably, such a disguise is penetrable to those members of the audience familiar with the oral-cultural referents the text employs, but likely not decipherable to an audience member unfamiliar with the particular oral-traditional code. In other words, when we examine the oral-traditional “language” of the text's production environment, we find layers of meaning not immediately discernible when the text is read in isolation.<sup>728</sup> Similarly, we can surmise that the use of such oral-traditional

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<sup>728</sup> It is important to note here that, where we discern in each of these texts elements suggestive of an oral-traditional code, our understanding of each text's oral-traditional environment is sketchy, at best. We must assume that for every referent we recognize, there may be dozens more that remain hidden from us—we have cracked only a very small fraction of the code.

referents in the past would have conveyed particular information to some members of the audience but not others. If Scott's "grumbling," and "foot-dragging" serve to conceal a more complex resistance to political and social domination, texts, too, may serve to conceal a larger program of resistance to oppression beneath a guise of benign comedy, harmless dialogue, or less threatening expressions of resistance to the status quo—a guise intended to avoid recriminations from the dominant group.

For each of the three texts considered in this study, it is possible to argue that there exists an underlying theme of resistance. While the nature of the resistance and the nature of the disguise differ markedly, all three texts use similar processes to cloak subversive ideology beneath a veil of oral-traditional referents unique to the environment in which the text was created or used.

In Chapter 1, I proposed that the Talmud could be interpreted as a "blueprint" for resistance that enabled Babylonian Jews to preserve and transmit a particular political and social philosophy. By deliberately preserving dissent, the rabbis endorsed a form of intellectual debate that encouraged questioning authority—not only of other rabbinic scholars, but of God Himself. The fact that in many cases resolution is not wholly achieved, or is achieved only after long debate, suggests that the ultimate goal is not resolution, but discussion, reflection and, ultimately, deeper insight.

This model of rabbinic dialectic, with its focus on dissent and the preservation of diverse opinions, helped foster a "fighting spirit" amongst those who studied Talmud and rabbinic philosophy over the centuries. In an environment where all opinions are open to challenge, and challenging even the most authoritative opinions is an acceptable—indeed, expected—avenue for discussion, the lines between subordinate and dominant are blurred, and power relationships are dynamic and constantly evolving. The talmudic blueprint enabled Jews not only to maintain their Jewish identity in hostile and unpredictable environments, but to nurture the perspective and critical thinking skills necessary to challenge authority in whatever form it might take. This blueprint for resistance preparation, concealed beneath the minutiae of talmudic argument, has been preserved and used by Jews ever since, often in oppressive political and social environments.

In Chapter 2, I argued that Homer's *Odyssey* disguises a tale of female resistance to male domination, which to some extent enables Penelope to rewrite the role circumscribed for her within the parameters of an ancient Greek patriarchy. Homer is able to do this by writing two versions of Penelope—a virtuous, socially acceptable Penelope serves to conceal both a subversive Penelope and Homer's provocative social commentary on the nature of male/female relationships in ancient Greece. Both versions of Penelope are duplicitous, but the virtuous Penelope is simplistically, almost childishly, duplicitous, and her deceit can be forgiven in the context of an ancient Greece that expects its women to be weak and silly and in need of male guidance. Behind this Penelope lurks a much more dangerously deceptive Penelope—one whose duplicity empowers only herself. Homer uses a transcript of tacitly acceptable resistance (i.e., Penelope deceives the suitors in order to further her husband's social and political goals) to conceal a socially unacceptable transcript of resistance (i.e., Penelope deceives Odysseus in order to further her own social and political goals). And it is in the hands of the second Penelope that the fate of Ithaca rests: Odysseus may be king, but in Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope has the power to deny him his throne.

Chapter 3 proposed that *Castle Rackrent* narrator Thady Quirk tells two tales in one. The first tale satisfies the expectations of the dominant population, represented by the "ignorant English reader" and the Anglo-Irish landowning class; the second speaks past the dominant audience to the subaltern or subordinate population represented by the native-Irish peasantry. Thady's fluency in two cultural languages—the oral traditions of his native-Irish upbringing and the idiom of a dominant Protestant Anglo-Ireland—enables him to disguise the extent of his role in the collapse of the Rackrent dynasty behind his loyal servitude to the Rackrent family. The disguise is successful precisely because both aspects of Thady are truthful representations of the "real" Thady Quirk, who is a study of eminently human contrasts. He *is* a loyal servant but he *is also* a clever traitor. He is at once proud of his son's achievements and ashamed of his methods, perhaps because in both cases he recognizes in Jason a reflection of himself. He loves the family he serves, despite its flaws, but he also loves the family into which he was born, and the

goals and desires of the two are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile peacefully. Ultimately, the nature of Thady's subversion requires that he retain to some extent the experiences and perspective of servitude in order to "witness himself triumphant"<sup>729</sup> over the Rackrent family and the Anglo-Irish order that has allowed the Rackrents and their kind to carve up and consume the native Ireland that Thady Quirk symbolizes. He is indeed, as Neill argues, the perfect undercover agent—his positive feelings for his masters are quite real, and their "simultaneous fraudulence"<sup>730</sup> is not consciously articulated, even to himself. Yet Chapter 3 also put forward the possibility that Thady's entire narrative, and the editorial carapace that contains it, serve primarily to *divert* audience attention away from another hidden transcript, namely, Edgeworth's veiled warning to other members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy that their role as political and cultural liaisons is secure only as long as the English and the native Irish continue to mystify each other. A Union with Great Britain threatens to upset that balance. In this interpretation, we are not meant to be able to read Thady Quirk's intentions; he exists *in order to confuse*—the author's symbolic representation of the cultural gap between the English and the native Irish, and the need for Anglo-Irish "translators."

One of the key similarities between all three texts is that in each, dialogue disguises action. If we strip away the words (i.e., an individual's diction or syntax, the exchange that occurs between characters within the confines of the narrative, the language used by the narrator) and examine simply the function of a scene or the action that occurs within the text, what becomes clear is that the action of the characters differs in some cases quite significantly from what the text or characters *say* they intend to do. When a narrative scene is stripped of all literary explanation about why or how a character does things, the meaning of the scene changes, and it is in the gap between the dialogue and the action that characters are able to exert some measure of control over their environment. For example, Thady repeats again and again his statements of love and loyalty to the Rackrent family; in the end, however, Thady's actions (or in some cases, his *inaction*) help enable his son Jason

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<sup>729</sup> O'Hanlon 1988, 205.

<sup>730</sup> Neill 2001, 89.

to assume control of the Rackrent estate. Penelope gives eminently socially acceptable reasons for delaying a marriage to one of her suitors and, later, for delaying her formal recognition and acceptance of Odysseus; ultimately, however, it is her actions—often in direct conflict with her words—that enable her to exert a measure of control over events and wield a level of power not traditionally acknowledged to be held by women within the limits of Greek patriarchy. Perhaps the most complex example of disguise in this context, the Talmud, represented in this study by the excerpt from Tractate Avodah Zarah, is a collection of dialogues that, among other things, mask the underlying intentions of the rabbinic academies to foster a spirit of resistance in the form of democratic exchange and the preservation of diverse, often dissenting, opinions. By encouraging a focus on the *words* used in the text, the rabbinic authors draw attention away from how the various elements of the text function together as a rabbinic pedagogical and political tool to galvanize support for a form of academic “fencing,” preserving a spirit of intellectual and philosophical resistance that would sustain, nurture and unite a physically disparate people through centuries of oppression.

*Text, context and independence*

We can conceive of human resistance as a response to an outside, potentially threatening force.<sup>731</sup> To some extent the character and strength of our resistance is determined by that outside force; how we resist is dependent to a large degree not only on what is within us, but what is within the Other. If this is the case, then, resistance must include a dialogue: there must be an Other to resist, and in order for our resistance to be successful, it must be in response to a particular domination exercised by the Other or perceived by the subordinate to be exercised by the Other. The dialogue of resistance varies, however, both in its intensity and in its participants. A dialogue of resistance may occur between subordinate and dominant, for example, taking the shape of rebellion, revolution, peaceful protest, or “grumbling,” among other forms. A dialogue of resistance may also take place

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<sup>731</sup> An individual may also experience internal resistance—to a new way of thinking, an unattractive solution to a problem, or some other factor. This study has focused solely on resistance to real or perceived oppression from an outside Other.

among similarly subordinated individuals or groups, as they share ideas and experiences. In these cases, such dialogue may be overt, as it is in rebellion or open protest, or it may be covert, disguised as less threatening communication or otherwise hidden from the dominant power as much as possible.

A “successful resistance” does not mean necessarily a method of resistance that usurps the dominant but, rather, a method that enables likeminded individuals to engage in dialogue—either directly with the Other in open or disguised defiance, or amongst themselves in order to share insight, experience and decision-making *in spite of* domination or oppression.<sup>732</sup> In this respect, all three texts examined in this study are not only successful *disguises* of resistance but successful “resistances” in and of themselves. Indeed, they are successful in part because they are successfully disguised, and have been thus left intact within the text, awaiting the next individual who understands the code and who can appreciate the implications of the hidden message and who, ultimately, can engage in the dialogue.

Recent scholarship in subaltern studies has sought evidence for the agency of the subaltern. But such subject-agency has proven elusive, in part because we define agency using Western, post-Enlightenment terms that do not always apply to the populations we wish to study, and because we assume that our investigative methods are capable of resurrecting an “original” subaltern-agent experience, untainted by dominant-power perspectives or the narrative of our Western historiography. In reality, it is difficult if not impossible to ensure that the narrative we create for the subaltern agent is one of his own making and not ours. Yet while we may not be able to “penetrate” the subject-agency of the subaltern,<sup>733</sup> it is possible to deepen our

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<sup>732</sup> Defined this way, “successful resistance” would include the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943) and the Battle of Thermopylai (480 BCE). In the former, the few thousand Polish Jews took a final stand against the Nazis and against all odds held off the German army for several weeks. Though all the resistance fighters were killed in battle or sent to the death camps, the uprising is still seen as a triumph of the Jewish spirit. In the Battle of Thermopylai (480 BCE), a small number of Greeks held off the Persian army for a considerable period, only to be defeated by treachery. Though all the Greek fighters were killed, Greek sources record the battle as a heroic victory. Cf. O’Hanlon (1988), who argues that the subaltern’s desire to subvert the program of his oppressor is not necessarily synonymous with his desire to cease being subordinate. The latter may exist in conjunction with the former, but if the subaltern gives up his subordinate role entirely and takes the place of his oppressor, he also gives up the opportunity to revel in the success of his subversion. See the discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>733</sup> O’Hanlon 1988, 196.

understanding of the nature of the dominant/subordinate relationship in a particular environment. When we speak of a dialogue of resistance, we emphasize the continuous nature of the exchange, both between dominant and subordinate, and among subordinates about their experiences of subjugation and resistance. This enables us to conceive of resistance not simply as a response to an outside threatening force, but as part of an ongoing expression of one's identity. In other words, an individual's resistance to oppression is simply one way in which that individual identifies him- or herself and shares common experiences with others. Within this framework, not only must the perspectives and motivations of the subordinate be studied within the context of his social and cultural environment in order for us to better understand how they relate to the dominant forces around him, but human resistance itself must also be examined within the broader context of human experience. What factors shape how resistance is expressed and when? How does resistance fit within the continuum of self-expression and self-determination?

#### *Looking forward*

"Literacy," "oral tradition" and "resistance" do not lend themselves easily to cross-cultural comparison: the descriptions of these phenomena are too broad, and their real-life manifestations too diverse to draw meaningful pan-cultural comparisons. Simple definitions often presume characteristics that do not occur universally (i.e., in all forms of "literacy," or in all forms of "resistance"); however, more meticulous definitions frequently delineate such specific parameters that the opportunity for cross-cultural comparison is diluted. But the *process* by which a culture or individual seeks to disguise subversive or socially unacceptable ideas from others offers significant opportunity for comparative analysis. This study focuses on a dynamic process rather than static attributes. Terms such as "literacy" and "resistance" depend on definitions supplied by the observer (and are always therefore ethnocentric to a certain degree); however, the process by which a group hides resistance using textual sources depends on culturally specific definitions of resistance and culturally specific textual disguises. That is, how a culture defines

resistance to domination and what it determines to be an appropriate disguise will depend on the cultural setting of the power relationships being expressed.

While the disguise processes in all three texts examined here are similar, the details of each disguise depend on the unique (oral-traditional) cultural environment of the text. This finding strengthens the New Historicist view that a text should not be studied in isolation from its unique social and cultural context. We should avoid binary-inspired cross-cultural comparisons of “literacy” and “oral tradition”—or, in the context of this study, “resistance” and “acquiescence.” A population’s literacy is the product of a unique set of social, cultural, economic and intellectual circumstances. We risk oversimplifying human experience if we presume, for example, that all “literacies” are versions of a universal “Literacy” (and thus that literacy in one culture is more or less comparable to literacy in another) or that all “resistance” will be easily identifiable because it looks like (our preconceived ideas of) resistance.

Yet the findings of this study also suggest that the New Historicist-informed perspective of the mid-twentieth century requires reassessment: we should expect to see broad, pan-cultural similarities in how emerging literacies reveal their oral-traditional environments, and how texts in very different cultures may be employed similarly as extensions of oral-cultural traditions when there is a need to conceal particular ideas or expressions. Our fear of ethnocentrism has inhibited our search for meaningful comparative models; a certain amount of generalization is necessary, however, for broad understanding.<sup>734</sup> Detail is fundamental, but it must be considered within the context of a larger framework—a framework founded on our observation of detail—to achieve insight into both the past of human experience and the future of human development. Rather than asking questions such as “How did women perceive their role in the patriarchal social framework of ancient Greece?” or “How did the rabbis in fifth-century Babylonia respond to political and social restrictions on Torah study?” a comparative model enables us to begin exploring

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<sup>734</sup> As, for example, in mathematics, when we generate mathematical formulas to explain repeatedly observed phenomena. This is not to suggest that human experience is predictable in the same way that a mathematical truth is predictable but, rather, that some elements of human experience may lend themselves to summary using similar models. See the discussion of Renfrew (1979) in the Introduction.

questions that apply to human culture more generally: In what ways do some human populations exert control over others? In what ways might a population reject or resist social control by others? How might people resist oppression without endangering themselves? Is covert resistance a precursor to overt rebellion? If so, what is the “flash point” and is it predictable?

Our challenge is to build models that enable us to examine details that are truly comparable. Observations about the characteristics of communication and resistance are generally shaped by our contemporary Western biases, which encourage drawing limited conclusions about cultural phenomena within culturally specific contexts. The three-principle model of disguise, with its focus on the *function* of text in the *method* of disguise, enables us to set in comparative perspective relationships between the processes of communication and resistance in diverse cultures. The focus on process also underscores the dynamic relationship between dominant and subordinate, and the constant (re)negotiation of power within varied cultural contexts. This dynamic process of negotiation lends itself to cross-cultural comparison in a way that observations about the attributes of dominant and subordinate populations in particular cultures do not.

The three-principle model of disguise proposed here serves as a starting point for comparative analysis. It should be tested against many more texts before it is used to suggest any definitive relationship between oral-traditional language and the concealment of political and social resistance in textual sources. Yet even from this limited investigation, it is possible to suggest avenues for future study. For example, In Chapter 1, I proposed that the Talmud could be interpreted as a “blueprint” that enabled Babylonian Jews to preserve and transmit a particular political and social philosophy. By deliberately preserving dissent, the rabbis arguably endorsed a form of intellectual debate that encouraged questioning authority—not only of other rabbinic scholars, but of God Himself. The fact that in many cases resolution is not wholly achieved, or is achieved only after long debate, suggests that the ultimate goal is not resolution, but discussion, reflection and, ultimately, deeper insight.

This model of rabbinic dialectic, with its focus on dissent and the preservation of diverse opinions, arguably helped foster a “fighting spirit” amongst those who

studied Talmud and rabbinic philosophy over the centuries. In an environment where all opinions are open to challenge, and challenging even authoritative opinions is an acceptable—indeed, expected—avenue of discussion, the lines between subordinate and dominant are blurred, and power relationships are dynamic and constantly evolving. The Talmudic blueprint enabled Jews not only to maintain a Jewish identity in hostile and unpredictable environments, but to nurture the perspective and critical thinking skills necessary to challenge authority in whatever form it might take. Arguably, the Talmud serves as a blueprint for resistance preparation, concealed beneath the minutiae of Talmudic argument—a blueprint that has been used by Jews ever since, often in oppressive political and social environments.

Could there be other blueprints for resistance in the textual record? Might we be able to perceive in other oral-traditional texts the seeds of future rebellion—even if the text itself seems a reflection of a benign environment? Can the three-principle model help alert us to these revolutionary beginnings? Does Homer's *Odyssey* contain the seeds of social change? Can Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* be understood as a prediction of Irish rebellion? If we apply the three-principle model to a wider field, can the slave narratives of the antebellum South be read as a blueprint for Emancipation?

Every text is potentially a political one. But the manner and method of a text's political statement depend on the particular character of the relationship between human beings and the written word in a given time and place. Specifically, the nature of the disguise depends to a significant extent on the oral character of the culture that produces the text, as these oral characteristics determine how the principles of disguise are applied. We do not often have the opportunity in cultural history to observe "everyday resistance" as it happens. By using a model that highlights the relationship between a text and its oral-traditional referents, and by applying this model in our reading of texts against the grain for suggestions of discontent, we open a window into processes of resistance and the role of writing and texts in the evolution of social authority in human experience.

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## Appendix

### Oral and literate forms

Though “oral tradition” and “literacy” are frequently used terms, they are often not well defined. Even a well-heeled definition frequently fails to take into consideration the variety of oral and literate modes in common use both historically and today. To conduct a meaningful comparative analysis, we must first consider which elements of “orality” and “literacy” are being compared, and how an artifact or tradition might exhibit these elements. It makes a difference whether by “oral” we mean orally composed, orally preserved, orally transmitted or aurally received. The table below suggests how we might think through this problem. It is not comprehensive, and is intended to provide the reader with a sense of how complex the issue is rather than a step-by-step guide to analysis. However, the exercise of placing a literary or oral-traditional piece within such a framework, and reflecting on how its placement might compare to that of other pieces, is illuminating and can offer insight into the role the piece might play in the human cultural context.

Activity	Mode of action
Composition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. oral composition of oral form (e.g., Homeric epics composed with formulae; some modern slam poetry)</li> <li>2. oral composition of literate text (e.g., Thomas Aquinas composes his essays and has his scribes record them in writing)</li> <li>3. literate composition of oral form (e.g., the writing of song lyrics, or of a play; some modern slam poetry)</li> <li>4. literate composition of literate text (e.g., Nabakov writes <i>Lolita</i>)</li> </ol>
Preservation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. oral preservation of oral form (e.g., memorized versions of Homeric hymns prior to their being in written form)</li> <li>2. oral preservation of literate text (e.g., memorized versions of written Homeric hymns, as performed by the <i>rhapsodes</i>)</li> <li>3. literate preservation of oral form (e.g., the written record of oral performance given by a poet, religious leader; Plato records in writing Socrates’ oral teachings)</li> <li>4. literate preservation of literate text (e.g., the Bible copied from one parchment scroll to the next)</li> <li>5. We might also consider the literate preservation of a memorized text as an additional form – not strictly 2, 3, or 4.</li> </ol>

Transmission	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. oral transmission of oral form (e.g., Socrates teaches his students)</li> <li>2. oral transmission of literate text (e.g., the rabbis teach oral torah aloud, even though the content of their discussions has been recorded in writing)</li> <li>3. literate transmission of oral form</li> <li>4. literate transmission of literate text (similar in many ways to #4 in Preservation)</li> </ol>
Reception	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. aural reception of oral form (listening to a performance of oral poetry, theatre)</li> <li>2. aural reception of literate text (listening to a reading of Dickens)</li> <li>3. literate reception (i.e., reading to oneself, as distinct from #1, hearing as a piece is performed aloud) of oral form set in writing (reading Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>)</li> <li>4. literate reception (i.e., reading to oneself, as distinct from #2, hearing as a text is read aloud) of literate text (reading Tolkien's <i>Lord of the Rings</i>)</li> </ol>
Discourse	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. oral discourse about oral forms (rabbinic discussions about oral law, recorded in written form in the Talmud)</li> <li>2. oral discourse about literate texts (rabbinic discussions about Torah, recorded in written form in the Talmud)</li> <li>3. literate discourse about oral forms (modern written commentary on Talmud and oral law)</li> <li>4. literate discourse about literate texts (modern written commentary on Torah)</li> </ol>