

“WHAT HAS BEEN WILL BE AGAIN”: SECONDARY ORALITY MADE  
MANIFEST IN MODERN NEO-SOPHISTRY

by

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“What has been will be again,  
what has been done will be done again;  
there is nothing new under the sun.”

ECCLESIASTES

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO ONGISM AND NEO-SOPHISTRY

### Origin

This thesis is an inquiry into the nature of secondary orality as a unique media context which Walter J. Ong identifies by the advent of the telephone, radio, and television. These media, he argues, have brought orality back to literate Western culture. However, his work offers little explanation of this phenomenon. Although this inquiry is largely in response to a need for updating Ong's theories in the twenty-first century, its focus is foremost to lay groundwork for future research by discussing the relevance of secondary orality in the twentieth century. The scope of this inquiry concerns the resurgence of sophistic studies in the rhetoric and composition field as a possible manifestation of secondary orality. This thesis examines this new media context through an Ongian comparison between the ancient sophists and the so-called neo-sophists as participants in similar transitory media contexts.

Ong's theory of secondary orality is based upon his analyses of oral and literate cultures, which dominate his 1982 work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. The ancient sophists, he explains, lived in a transitory media context, for their area of expertise, rhetoric, "though concerned with oral speech, was . . . the product of writing" (108). Ong argues that writing produced the analytical thinking characteristic of Western philosophy, primarily represented through Plato. The sophists, originating from an oral culture one generation preceding Plato, used writing as a means of perfecting oratory. This approach to writing places the sophists in a period of media transition from orality to literacy.

The neo-sophists of the 1980s and 90s, meanwhile, look to the ancient sophists as models for their rhetorical theories. Conversely, however, they are instructors of writing

composition, not oratory. As such, they are participating in a traditionally literate society whereas the sophists are more aligned with a primarily oral society, a culture that had previously never encountered literacy. This is an important point, for the differences between the media contexts of the sophists and neo-sophists become evident through their perceptions of writing as a medium in each respective time period. As an authority to their epistemology, the neo-sophists cite Jacques Derrida. Ong identifies Derrida among the *textualists* that “insists writing is ‘not a supplement of the spoken word’” (qtd. in 162). This assertion from Derrida marks a departure from traditional perceptions of writing as representing speech—a point Plato’s Socrates makes in the *Phaedrus*—thereby separating Derrida, and the neo-sophists as his subscribers, from the residual influence of primary orality. As such, just as Plato’s *Phaedrus* demonstrates the rise of literacy as the new media context, Derrida’s perspective is suggestive of another media context emerging.

Derrida and the neo-sophists share a media context dominated by the printed word; meanwhile, they also share Plato and the sophists’ position in a period of media transition. Derrida published his most famous works in the late-1960s and 70s, well after the first appearances of electronic media, the media that, as Ong argues, signify the beginning of secondary orality. Therefore, by Ong’s terms, the neo-sophists exist in a transitory media context similar to that of the sophists’ except theirs is a transition from literacy to orality. This connection between Ong and the neo-sophists suggests an Ongian analysis of the sophists versus the neo-sophists may reveal new insights into both secondary orality and neo-sophistry’s historical context simultaneously. This first aspect to this inquiry operates from the following research question:

1. What does examining the parallels between the ancient sophists and the neo-

sophists in terms of their media contexts reveal about secondary orality as both a familiar and new media context?

To add depth to the findings from this question, this inquiry also examines Plato and Derrida as philosophers mutually concerned with the implications of their media contexts.

Plato and Derrida are each connected to their contemporary group—Plato to the sophists and Derrida to the neo-sophists—insofar as they present evidence of a media transition taking place in their times. They reveal this transition through their analyses of writing, not as a practice but as a medium. Plato critiques writing as the new medium of his time in the *Phaedrus*, and his critique is characteristic of both the oral culture from which he originates and the literate culture he is moving towards, a point that will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. Meanwhile, Derrida implicitly claims that electronic media have extended writing in his “Signature Event Context.” This observation does not only imply a definition of writing broader than Plato’s. It bears the analytical character Ong attributes to literate culture, yet Derrida’s capacity to observe these changes taking place is indicative of new media emerging in his time. Due to their common awareness of the implications surrounding new media, Plato and Derrida function as tentative parentheses in this Ongian analysis marking the Western entry into and exit from the literate consciousness.

Plato and Derrida’s common interest in media implications makes them essential to understanding the connection between the sophists and neo-sophists. More specifically, their differing perspectives on writing add dimension to distinguishing primary orality from secondary orality, for Plato discusses what writing may do and Derrida what new forms writing may take in an electronic world. In asserting Plato and

Derrida's usefulness to this inquiry, this thesis operates from the assumption that comparing the sophists and neo-sophists yields significant differences as well as similarities between the two since they exist in reversed media transitions. In drawing from Plato and Derrida's analyses, this inquiry is supplemented through an additional research question:

2. How is secondary orality distinct from both primary orality and literacy, specifically as shown through comparing Plato and Derrida's analyses of writing?

As shown in these questions, the focus of this second part is to identify how secondary orality is a distinct media context of its own and not merely a complete return to a previous way of life.

There are three issues to address before proceeding. First, Ong and Derrida have differing notions of "literacy" due to their different definitions of writing. Ong defines writing in a more traditional sense as formal semiotic systems signifying precise sounds, words, and ideas. Derrida defines writing more broadly as any sign composed in the absence of the receiver ("Signature," 1476). As this inquiry is derived from Ong's theories, the term "literacy" shall refer to traditional forms of reading and writing.

Second, it should be noted that in confining this study of media to the sophists and neo-sophists, this inquiry does not examine the historical shifts within the Western literate media context (e.g. the transitions among Medieval, Renaissance, and industrial periods; the evolution of literary genres; the distinct effects of typography versus chirography—that is, print versus handwriting). Ong offers some insights into these complexities in his fifth chapter "Print, Space, and Closure," but they are not subjects of interest in this inquiry. This is because the nuances involved in Western literacy do not entail a media shift as drastic as speech to writing or writing to electronics. The transition

from chirography to typography pertains much significance in Western history, but even this change preserves the qualities of literacy when these are juxtaposed to the world of orality or electronics. Therefore, it is the concern of this inquiry to compare the sophists and neo-sophists as mutually operating on opposite sides of the literate age.

The third issue concerns the status of electronic media today. Because electronic media have advanced exponentially since both Ong and the neo-sophists—with the arrival of social media as a cultural reality—the twenty-first century West may be in a new media context from that of the neo-sophists. However, because there is little literature examining secondary orality as a culture of its own, this inquiry into Ong’s theory is necessary prior to examining the media context produced via social media. The findings for this inquiry will, therefore, serve to offer focus to future subjects of study.

## **Literature**

Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* is perhaps the most condensed cross-examination of oral and literate cultures available. He argues that it is essential to approach these cultures “diachronically or historically, by comparing successive periods with one another” (2). Indeed, his theories of media influence are based on his comparisons among various historical periods (mostly in the West), separating each according to the dominant medium of communication: orality, writing, print, and electronics. Ong’s method of comparing successive periods makes the advent of electronic media indispensable for discussing literate cultures, for as he observes, “Contrasts between electronic media and print have sensitized us to the earlier contrast between writing and orality” (2-3). In other words, the West (and, consequently, much of the remaining world) is in a post-literate age insofar as the printed word, while not obsolete, is losing its place as the dominant mode of communication.

In his introduction, he explains that this electronic period may be described as *secondary orality*. The term *secondary* refers to the culture's inextricable connection to literacy. Although electronic media have resurrected oratory in mass communication, they rely on literacy for their existence since a literate culture invented them. Ong focuses on early Western history and explains little about secondary orality. Meanwhile, this electronic world is the media context of the neo-sophists, writing barely a decade after Ong's book was published. The implied historical tie between the sophists and neo-sophists suggests a possible avenue for better understanding secondary orality through a comparative analysis.

Ideologically, Susan C. Jarratt's 1991 book *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* clearly articulates the case for neo-sophistry. She argues in the opening chapter that Plato's disdain for the sophists has tarnished their legacy in Western civilization: "The moral, artistic, and intellectual 'otherness' of the sophists is comprehended in a profoundly influential disciplinary exclusion: Plato cast the whole field of rhetoric in the shadow of philosophy" (3). Jarratt's case for sophistry entails rejecting Plato's conviction that philosophy is a first-order discipline and rhetoric a second-order discipline. A sophistic approach where rhetoric is an epistemic process, she asserts, will place rhetoric on an equal playing field with philosophy.

Jarratt contends rhetoric as a collaborative process is an important means of discovering probabilities rather than truth. She explains this notion when discussing the sophistic method of antithesis: "[A]ntithesis creates an openness to the multiplicity of possible causal relations . . . [It] is not a spurious trick for clouding the minds of the listeners but rather works to awaken in them an awareness of the multiplicity of possible truths" (22). Jarratt asserts that the philosophical approach of the Platonic rhetorical

model restricts the scope of ideas brought to the table. In this section, she not only vouches for the usefulness of a sophistic rhetoric but also denies the validity of Plato's central objection to the sophists: that they manipulated the masses by the sheer power of their words. Conversely, Jarratt contends a sophistic rhetoric is liberating to discourse, giving theoretically all ideas a platform under the premise that philosophical merit is unattainable.

Jarratt's book is the successor to two other important works advocating for a revival of sophistry. Self-declared sophist Jasper Neel advocates for an epistemic rhetoric similar to Jarratt's, claiming a sophistic rhetorical model "prevents philosophy from occupying any position that would allow it to judge rhetoric and writing" (203). He opens his book *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* with an attack on Plato's *Phaedrus* on account of the philosopher's criticisms of writing. According to Plato, writing "is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind" (Ong 78). Plato believed writing would weaken the mind by relieving it of the conservative task of memory. For this reason, Plato's Socrates concludes that dialectic is the supreme method to philosophizing.

Applying Derridean deconstruction, Neel argues that Plato's true purpose in critiquing writing in the *Phaedrus* is not so much the preservation of truth as it is to discredit the writers that succeed him. He calls this Plato's attempt to dominate rhetoric, giving himself "absolute control of a system that after him will be corrupted, unable to regain a position of authority, unable to begin the search for truth" (6). Like Jarratt, Neel is asserting Plato's metaphysics has clamped rhetoric down for all of Western history. To be clear, the focus of this inquiry is not to examine the merit of Neel's attacks on Plato. However, Neel's argument is significant because he acknowledges the power of the

medium on the mind in emphasizing Plato's skill in utilizing the media of his time. This point not only aligns with Ong's theory that the medium shapes the culture but also echoes the words of Marshall McLuhan from his 1967 work *The Medium is the Message*. McLuhan claims that every medium in a culture has a message of its own apart from its content. Similarly, in contesting Plato's estimation of writing, Neel is engaging in a discussion of the medium's message.

Although Neel mentions the electronic age once (36), it is Sharon Crowley who suggests a link between the resurgence of sophistry and electronics in her essay "A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry." She begins by asserting the traditional model of education, as endorsed by Plato and modeled in the renaissance period, is no longer serviceable due to the rise of globalism: "Given the enormous scope of the modern global village, it is no longer easy for a single individual to accrue either the universal wisdom or the personal authority that was attributed to the classical citizen-orator within the *polis*" (319). Whether consciously or unconsciously, Crowley has cited McLuhan through her reference to the "global village," a term he coined in his 1962 work *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. This global village refers to the shrinking distance between cultures resulting from the advent of electronics. According to McLuhan, the philosophical homogeneity of the West began imploding from exposure to a greater variety of ideas and information through electronics, specifically television. As such, Crowley's reference to the global village is also a reference to electronic media's influence on not only the culture but also on education.

Crowley inadvertently acknowledges the media's role in shaping her education model. This point is indicative of a connection between Ong's theory of secondary orality and the resurgence of sophistry. Yet despite the significance of her observation, Crowley



does not elaborate further on this connection and she cites neither Ong nor McLuhan in her references. This deficient attention to current media effects in academia suggests more research is necessary for clearly identifying the characteristics of the neo-sophists' own media context.

## **Methods**

As stated in the Origin section, this investigation operates from the following research questions:

1. What does examining the parallels between the ancient sophists and the neo-sophists in terms of their media contexts reveal about secondary orality as both a familiar and new media context?
2. How is secondary orality distinct from both primary orality and literacy, specifically as shown through comparing Plato and Derrida's analyses of writing?

The procedures to answering these questions are interwoven in the following chapters. Chapter II entails drawing largely from Ong, Eric Havelock, and Plato in order to analyze the traits distinguishing oral and literate cultures. Chapter III involves applying these traits to the rhetorical methods of the sophists as a means to illustrating their transitory media context. Chapters IV and V move towards examining the neo-sophists. The former chapter entails drawing from Ong, McLuhan, and Derrida to identify characteristics that distinguish secondary orality from earlier media contexts, and the latter chapter consists of applying these traits to the rhetorical methods of the neo-sophists, who exist in a transitory media context similar to that of the sophists'. These procedures derive foremost from Ong's theories regarding the contrasting characteristics of oral and literate societies.

In Ong's third chapter to *Orality and Literacy* "Some Psychodynamics of Orality," he examines key characteristics of primary orality, or that culture without any

current or previous encounter with literacy. He identifies several of these characteristics of oral culture by contrasting them with those of literate culture. The following is a list of these characteristics, some juxtaposed with a characteristic more commonplace in literate culture:

- Additive rather than subordinative
- Aggregative rather than analytic
- Redundant or “copious”
- Conservative or traditionalist
- Close to the human lifeworld
- Agonistically toned
- Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
- Homeostatic
- Situational rather than abstract

These characteristics collectively build the Ongian lens for the first two chapters of this inquiry. As several of these characteristics concern the culture’s approach to learning and knowledge, this inquiry operates under the assumption that the media context of a culture has epistemological implications.

For examining the sophists in Chapter III, this thesis includes the work of Havelock and W. C. K. Guthrie for supplementary information on ancient Greek culture. The procedure consists first of reading texts by the sophists themselves—particularly by Protagoras and Gorgias—and Plato’s dialogues featuring the sophists. After this procedure follows a search for characteristics and methods in the writings and of the speakers featured (in the dialogues) that are indicative of oral and literate cultures. Certainly, this procedure is not to equate early literacy with primary orality, but it is to

assume that literacy at such an early stage as during the sophists' time carries the residual influence of the oral culture that precedes it. Using Ong's method of analysis by comparison, this procedure determines whether an oral characteristic in question fits the culture by evaluating whether its antithetical characteristic, derived from literate culture, is more fitting than the oral. There follows a similar procedure to examining the neo-sophists.

The second two chapters connect the sophists with the neo-sophists. If the modern West is in a stage of secondary orality as Ong claims, there should be some characteristics of primary orality that have resurfaced in the "post-literate" age of electronics. Having established which oral and literate characteristics are present (and absent) among the ancient sophists, this procedure turns to the neo-sophists and examines secondary orality as a unique media context. The methodological framework of this portion is largely a repeat of the first two chapters except for a distinct inventory of characteristics and a more contemporary set of literature to analyze. Chapter IV explores secondary orality via Ong's fragmented commentary, McLuhan's observations on electronics, and previous commentary on primary orality and literacy to creating a unique criterion of characteristics. Chapter V examines the arguments of the neo-sophists through the newly formed criterion established in Chapter IV.

An important supplement to the chapters discussing orality, literacy, and secondary orality is the implementation of Plato and Derrida as parentheses marking the timeframe of Western literacy. Whereas the sophists and neo-sophists do not focus on media implications in rhetorical studies, Plato and Derrida mutually discuss the influence of media on consciousness. Since Plato and Derrida are, chronologically, more part of literate culture than their contemporaries, this inquiry draws attention to the

characteristics Plato and Derrida share that are indicative of literate culture. This section of the inquiry gives priority to Plato's *Phaedrus* and Derrida's *Dissemination* and "Signature Event Context" as the primary texts of analysis. As Plato and Derrida live in a period of transition, however, the procedure also takes note of peculiar characteristics that do not fit literate culture, specifically as shown through Plato and Derrida's analyses of writing.

Having answered the questions articulated in this proposal, this inquiry closes with an examination of the implications to these findings. This portion also includes speculation into the relevance of secondary orality in the twenty-first century, specifically as it relates to current discussions over social media. If the findings produce more questions, there also will be an account of these questions as possible avenues for further research.

## **II. ORALITY AND LITERACY: TWO CULTURES, TWO MINDS**

### **Ong on Orality and Literacy**

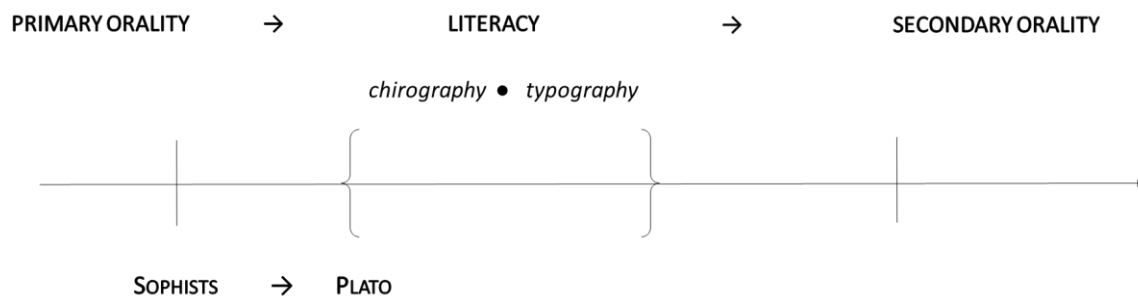
An important premise underlying Ong's work is that oral and literate cultures differ not only in custom but also in consciousness. Writing, Ong argues, creates an entirely different way of thinking and of perceiving the world and so produces a civilization fundamentally distinct from an oral culture. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to give careful examination to the distinct characteristics of oral versus literate cultures. These traits constitute the analytical lens for observing the sophists and neo-sophists in terms of their media contexts.

This chapter includes three main sections. The first is an explanation for identifying the beginning of Western literacy. The second is an analysis drawn mostly from Ong's third chapter in *Orality and Literacy*, "Some Psychodynamics of Orality," where he lists nine characteristics typical of oral cultures: additive rather than subordinative; aggregative rather than analytical; redundant and copious; conservative and traditional; close to the human lifeworld; agonistically toned; empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; homeostatic; and situational rather than abstract. The analysis includes minor modifications to this list which shall be explained shortly. The third section involves an overview of some objections to Ong's theories regarding the impact of literacy. Though Ong's work has permeated the culture of academia, his theories are not wholly accepted. This section addresses a selection of objections with justification for treating Ong as the basis for this inquiry. The conclusion includes a brief explanation of Ong's theory as it applies to the sophists.

### **Plato: The Opening Parenthesis to Western Literacy**

The difficulty to applying an Ongian lens lies in identifying the point where a

society—in this case, ancient Greece—has formally moved from orality to literacy. Plato has been chosen as the landmark of this move primarily because key scholars behind this inquiry look to Plato as the archetype of the Western literate man: Ong writes that by Plato’s time, “the Greeks had at long last effectively interiorized writing” (*Orality*, 24); in *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan cites Plato as the pioneer to attacking the oral poetic tradition in favor of the “abstract, speculative reasoning” made possible through writing (113-14); Derrida, whom will be discussed in a later chapter, calls Plato “the father of *logos*” (*Dissemination*, 75), in reference to the Western philosophic tradition, also produced by writing in Ong’s theory. Each of these texts accredits Plato as a historical landmark for change in the Western consciousness that is attributed to the advent of writing. This inquiry, therefore, operates on the premise that Plato represents the beginning—the opening *parenthesis*—of formal Western literacy.



**Figure 1      Plato as the closing parenthesis of Western literacy**

The aforementioned relationship is represented in **Figure 1**. This term “parenthesis” is a refashioning of Professor Lars Ole Sauerberg’s term, the “Gutenberg Parenthesis,” which he uses to distinguish the 500 years of typographic (or print) culture that begin with Gutenberg’s invention and end with the advent of electronic media. The term parenthesis here refers to the beginning of Western literacy in general—

encompassing both chirography and typography. Where Plato signifies the opening parenthesis in this inquiry, Derrida represents the closing parenthesis, a point to be discussed in Chapter IV.

Admittedly, there are multiple problems with marking Plato as the beginning of Western literacy. The most important relates to the dating of the Greek alphabet. Clearly, naming Plato as the point of formal literacy is not to claim the Greeks did not read and write before him. Writing came to Athens centuries before the sophists arrived on the scene and their work was preceded by the writings of the natural philosophers, the pre-socratics. However, neither the dating of the alphabet nor of earliest writings is indicative of widespread literacy in a society. Furthermore, even identifying the point of “widespread literacy” is problematic regarding pre-modern societies since reading and writing, and education in general, were reserved for a privileged few for most of world history. As such, there must be a more effective means to identifying the point of formal literacy. No one event or person can represent all the complexities involved in a civilization transitioning from orality to literacy. So in identifying Plato as the opening parenthesis of Western literacy, this investigation assumes that full literacy is the point when reading and writing have permeated formal education. According to Havelock and Robert J. Connors, this would have been the case by the time Plato opened his academy in the late fourth century but not long before then.

Havelock derives his theories from the work of Rhys Carpenter, who argues the Greek alphabet may well have appeared no earlier than 720 B.C., though conventional scholarship had dated it centuries earlier. Yet Havelock notes “we still lack any *incontrovertible* evidence that would *insist* it was earlier than 700” (51, 52; emphasis in original). Such a late date suggests literacy was still developing even during the time of

Socrates and the sophists—that is, as Havelock argues, ancient Greece would have been in a period of “craft literacy” in which only paid professionals learned to read and write (47). Connors affirms this theory with the observation that there is no evidence schoolboys learned to read in Greece until the last few years of the fifth century, shortly before Socrates’s death in 399 B.C and just decades before Plato founded his academy in Athens (39). Judging from Havelock’s theory of a late Greek literacy, Plato appears in a period when reading and writing have only recently penetrated education. This makes Plato among the first educators to implement reading and writing in the classroom, thereby actively spreading literacy throughout Athens (and Greece, by extension).

In addition to his remarkable position in history, Plato also distinguishes himself from the sophists and Socrates, who might compete as potential markers of Western literacy, through his awareness of the media effects around him. In fact, the irony of designating Plato as the parenthesis of Western literacy is that the philosopher expresses as many reservations about writing, the technology of literate culture, as he does about the poetic tradition that characterized the oral Greek world. On the one hand, he condemns the poets in *The Republic* as “lovers of sounds and sights . . . incapable of seeing or loving absolute beauty” (144)—as obstacles of the philosopher-kings in his utopia. On the other hand, Plato is just as pensive about writing. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato’s Socrates warns that writing will cause people to become forgetful. Recounting the words of the Egyptian king Thamus, Socrates notes, “They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written” (*Phaedrus*, 280-81). Though Plato’s opinion is debatable, his assertions demonstrate a keen discernment of the implications of media. As Jasper Neel observes, “Few writers in history have been as hard on writing as Plato was” (64). Plato’s fear is telling. His writings signal to the future literary world that



Athens is transitioning from orality to literacy. Only in Plato is the gravity of this transition in Greece so clearly articulated. Thus, the beginning of Western literacy is best understood in association with the founder of Western philosophy.

### **Oral and Literate Minds**

This section draws largely from Ong's third chapter of *Orality and Literacy* to explain the characteristics of oral and literate cultures. To supplement these explanations, however, this section also includes illustrations from his essay, "Literacy and Orality Today," as well as from the works of Havelock, McLuhan, and Plato. Whereas Ong's work is a broad analysis of oral and literate cultures in general, Havelock devotes his work to Greek literacy exclusively and McLuhan examines the effects of media in general. Both of these sources are cited as authorities in Ong's work and will, therefore, add to establishing a faithful representation of his theories. Meanwhile, Plato's awareness of media implications makes him a valuable resource to observing the implications of both the orality and literacy.

In these explanations, some traits in Ong's original list have been combined or added to for brevity and clarity. Ong explains in his introduction to that his book is concerned with the differences between orality and literacy (1), and so the traits of orality he lists in his third chapter are identified by juxtaposing oral cultures with literate cultures. Where oral cultures are *additive*, literate cultures are *subordinative*. For this reason, where Ong does not include a contrasting literate trait in his list, this analysis adds one to account for both cultures. For example, where Ong writes that oral cultures tend to be *redundant*, *concise* has been added as the literate counterpart to complete the contrastive pair. These modifications are based on Ong's observations in *Orality and Literacy* but not explicitly stated in the original list, and they have been placed in

parentheses to distinguish them from the original list. Lastly, the list has been reordered in some places to accommodate logical transition between some traits. The following is a series of explanations for each contrastive pair.

*Additive versus subordinative*

Ong explains that the different ways oral and literate cultures use conjunctions are demonstrative of their composition priorities. Oral cultures tend to use conjunctions of addition whereas literate cultures regularly use conjunctions of subordination. That is because an oral society prioritize pragmatics, such as the convenience of the speaker, because all composition in oral cultures are meant to be spoken (Ong 38). Conjunctions of addition are less various and give the speaker a sense of continuity, moving from one subject to the next. Literate cultures, however, rely on subordination because they form meaning through syntactic structures. Ong explains that is because literate cultures lack “the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar” (38). Being without the social context of the speaker, who may use it to guide his or her dramatic performance of the text, writers must depend upon linguistic meaning.

*Aggregative versus analytical*

Without writing, oral societies rely upon memory as guide because there is no external record to refer to. In such a situation, oral cultures break down presentation of knowledge in formulaic fashion, by “stitching together proverbs, antitheses, epithets, and other ‘commonplaces’” (“Literacy,” Ong 2). The Greeks referred to this method as “rhapsodizing,” or literally “to stitch song together” (qtd. in *Orality*, Ong 22). Naturally, this method was a significant aid to reciting poetry in public. Ong writes that Homer had “some sort of phrase book in his head” (22). The speaker utilizes these for recall; the

hearers are responsible for filling in the gaps.

In contrast, writing makes analytical thinking possible by obviating the necessity of aggregation. Much of this is due to the contrasting nature of the spoken and the written word. Ong writes that “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence” (Ong 32), which means oral discourse is marked by its mortality. Aggregation, therefore, undergirds oral preservation of knowledge in the absence of a written record. Once knowledge is recorded outside the speaker in writing, the writer may then reference the text rather than his or her own memory for the knowledge it contains. It is for this reason that Plato argued writing would weaken memory. In addition, however, writing allows for deeper analytical thinking. With a text existing outside the mind, the writer may examine the text more deeply to make meaning more precise and explicit. However, writing not only makes this analytical procedure possible; it also makes it necessary.

In “Literacy and Orality in Our Times,” Ong explains that because the audience of the writer is absent during the composing process, “the writer must anticipate all the different senses in which any statement can be interpreted and correspondingly clarify meaning, making sure to anticipate every objection that might be made and to cover it suitably” (3). For this reason, Ong continues, there is “no absolute measure” for how much detail the writer must include in a text (3). Writers not only have the means to analytical thinking but *must* practice it due to the nature of the medium. The writer has to be sure that all terms are clearly defined and all arguments fully explained. It is because of this necessity for detail that McLuhan writes that the “written word spells out what is quickly and implicitly spoken” (82). Where the spoken word has a context in time and space, writing evidently relies on explicitness to ensure meaning is not lost once the writer is absent or deceased.

*Redundant (versus concise)*

Even as such detailed analytical thinking is intimately tied to writing, it is also writing that enables short, concise composition. This is due to an important epistemological difference between oral and literate cultures. Because writing is not available for reference, Ong explains, oral cultures have to preserve knowledge “by repeating it” (“Literacy,” 2). As mentioned before, this lack of reference is the reason for the aggregative formulas poets like Homer implemented as aids to recitation. This formulaic method of preserving knowledge combined with the additive nature of oral speech are important reasons why the differing rhythmic patterns of poetry and prose make poetry more conducive to oral society and prose to literate society.

Poetry more naturally accommodates the orbital (or circular) quality of aggregative and redundant methods of recitation. In contrast, prose is more linear and so benefits from concision for conveying meaning more efficiently. It is due to this difference between orbital poetry and linear prose that Havelock contends poetry “constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect” (47). Havelock’s claim should not be dismissed on account of its gravity, for breaking from the redundancy of poetry is no easy task. Ong writes that eliminating this redundancy requires a “time-obviating technology” which is writing (*Orality*, 40). With the appearance of writing, literate societies no longer require the redundant and copious customs of oral speech. Writing ensures the preservation of knowledge, and so it is best to convey that knowledge as concisely as possible so as to move on to the next question more efficiently. As such, the medium of writing is necessary for making redundancy unnecessary and concision a desirable quality.

### *Traditional (versus modern)*

Because oral cultures require a variety of methods to preserving memory, their immediate concern is how much of the past is preserved in the present. The old man or woman is an oral culture's archive of knowledge; the elderly possess all epistemological authority. This tradition is not mere dogma. It is a necessary ritual set in place for the preservation of an entire way of life. In contrast, Ong writes, writing diminishes the role of the elderly because the written word may preserve knowledge even after the elderly have died (*Orality*, 41). Moreover, since writing may be passed around from one culture to another, writing from the outside world may include knowledge that even the immediate community does not know. In this sense, people in oral cultures are more focused on the present moment, having to invest their time learning from their elders who are with them, whereas those of literate cultures are more future oriented, for the permanence of the written word relieves the mind of the task of knowledge preservation and allows its society to look to the future (Ong 41). This is the focus of modernity. Yet literate societies have an orientation towards the past that will be discussed in the next contrastive pair.

### *Homeostatic (versus archival)*

These traits refer to where oral and literate cultures look for epistemological guidance in making decisions. Ong explains that oral cultures tend to be homeostatic, meaning they make decisions based upon their current situations and preserve and shed memories according to their relevance (*Orality*, 46). In such a culture, written records have inferior authority to that of the current custom. The present overrules the past. This is a stark contrast to the epistemological perspective of literate cultures where, as Neil Postman observes, the written word is "assumed" to be more accurate than the spoken

(20-21). Literate societies are archival, drawing from the past for guidance in the present situation. This is due to the literate value of precedent as an epistemological authority. In this sense, the past overrules the present in a literate society. The record is superior to current trends.

This difference between homeostatic and archival cultures is, once more, a product of the nature of the medium in question. As previously mentioned, the spoken word is perishable, so the elderly are the only archives of knowledge available due to their memories. Writing changes this situation, producing an archive outside the mind. Plato takes note of this distinction through Thamus's commentary in the *Phaedrus*, referring to writing as "external marks that are alien" to the human mind (68). His complaint against writing is that it detaches knowledge for people and leads them to rely upon what is outside their own memory databank. It seems Plato is not far off in this respect as literate cultures look to the external record rather than human memory. The permanence of the written word, in contrast to the mortality of the spoken word, allows for a record stretching across a timespan longer than the elder's lifetime, but, more importantly, it makes that record more reliable than the memory of an individual, which changes and deteriorates in time. As such, where the oral cultures morph and shape their rituals based on their present situations, literate cultures morph and shape as archives present old and new precedents.

*(Communal and public versus individual and private)*

This contrastive pair has been added to Ong's original list on grounds of its relevance and of its frequent appearance in Ong's work. Oral and literate cultures have distinct social situations because of the distinct social contexts of speaking and writing. Speech relies upon presence, the presence of hearers, or else it leaves no impact. The

necessity of hearers is what makes oral societies more communal, for “listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group” (*Orality*, Ong 134). Thus, people of oral societies are simultaneously involved in the speech of one person. And because the spoken word relies on presence, it is always public.

The written word is not public in a literate society unless a book is read aloud—in which case the medium would be predominantly oral. Writing, in contrast to speech, relies on absence. The reader is absent during the composing process, and the writer is absent (usually) when the reader reads the text. Both situations are private processes, processes that create what Havelock calls the “autonomous personality” (204) and McLuhan the “disinterested” fragmented man (157). Although the writer must imagine his audience, an audience which “is always a fiction” (“Literacy,” Ong 6), he or she is not constrained by an immediate social situation as the public speaker is. The writer is autonomous, an individual independent in a way the speaker never is. In the same way, the reader is autonomous, having no compulsion to respond vocally to the writer as the audience does to the speaker.

*Situational (and close to the human lifeworld) versus abstract*

Ong writes that without elaborate analytic categories produced from writing, oral cultures relate knowledge by “assimilating the alien objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings” (*Orality*, 42). Non-literates must associate meaning from their everyday experiences. In A. R. Luria’s study of primarily oral cultures in the Soviet Union, non-literates identified geometrical figures and other shapes according to associated objects—i.e. a *circle* is a *plate*, a *triangle* a *shovel* (qtd. in *Orality*, Ong 50). Tendencies like these in oral cultures are due to the higher degree of daily social interaction and the absence of a medium for representing knowledge in the

abstract. In this world, meaning is elusive, shifting according to the situation or social context.

In literate societies, however, writing provides a means for separating the knower from the known through external signs. As a result, the writer can detach the concrete from the abstract. Much of this process of detachment (or fragmentation, as McLuhan would say) is accomplished due to the heightened role of imagination in the writing process. As mentioned beforehand, the writer is not like the speaker in that he or she has no audience present when writing. Ong describes the writer as isolated: “There are no live persons facing the writer to clarify his thinking by their reactions. There is no feedback. There are no auditors to look pleased or puzzled. This is . . . a terrifying world, a lonely, unpeopled world” (“Literacy,” 3). Writing in isolation, the writer is distant from the human lifeworld and relies on his or her imagination to create an abstract audience to respond to in writing. This initial abstraction subsequently opens the door to categorizing all objects in the abstract. Therefore, just as writing both enables and demands analytical thinking, so it also enables and demands abstract thinking for it to be properly executed.

It should be noted that this discussion has conflated the oral closeness with the human lifeworld with the tendency to be situational. Where Ong has separated these two traits in his original list, this analysis contends that an oral culture’s closeness to the human lifeworld is directly proportionate to its tendency to be situational. In addition, the literate culture’s tendency to think abstractedly, as Ong argues, is antithetical to the oral man’s method of associating knowledge with concrete objects and social experiences. For this reason, these traits will be discussed in tandem here and in subsequent chapters.

*Agonistically toned (versus disinterested)*

Ong writes that the social epistemology of oral cultures produces an agonistic



attitude in verbal discourse: “By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle” (*Orality*, 43). Because oral cultures rely upon verbal, not written, discourse, knowledge is always exchanged within the subjective and spontaneous context of human social interactions. Verbal conflict is a way of life in the oral world. In contrast, literate societies experience a higher level of disinterestedness due to the systematic processes of writing. Another complaint from Plato regarding writing is that it cannot defend itself. Whereas the speaker may respond to any objection, a written text can merely say “the same thing over and over again” whenever the reader questions it (*Phaedrus* 69). In other words, written texts are not dynamic as the speaker is; they are static. The written word is not personally involved as the spoken word is because it is decontextualized. Being part of an external archive, it transcends the chronological context that binds the speaker. For this reason, literate cultures are less agonistic because they lack the dynamic social context that produces such verbal battles as in an oral culture. Writing affords both writer and reader a disinterested attitude when conveying and processing discourse. The following trait considers this aspect more in detail.

*Empathetic and participatory versus objectively distanced*

Because speech relies on the presence of speakers and hearers, oral cultures are more conducive to emotional involvement and participation. In the Homeric tradition, Ong explains, it was customary to personally identify with Odysseus or Achilles while hearing a display from the poets (*Orality*, 46). In contrast, literate cultures value objectivity afforded them from the written word. Havelock writes that the “written signs enabled the reader to dispense with most of the emotional identification by which alone the acoustic record was sure of recall” (208). This phenomenon may be explained by the

absence of the human voice in a written text, but the writing process itself contributes to this effect. In the event of writing, there is physical distance established through the written signs, but there is also emotional distance due to the process of separating the knower from the known, the writer from the written. The writer has the luxury of detaching his or her emotion from the situation because of the isolating nature of writing, away from spontaneous verbal discourse. Then, he or she may examine what is written from a distance without becoming involved in an immediate verbal battle. The writer is objectively distanced; the speaker is intimately involved.

### **Objections to Ong and Havelock**

Whereas Ong's theories of orality and literacy constitute the basis of this inquiry, there are some objections to be addressed before continuing. Rebutting the work of David R. Olson, cited in *Orality and Literacy*, John Halverson argues that language bias "is determined by the purpose of the language act, not by the modality, spoken or written, of the language" (628). Halverson asserts that the claim that writing produces a new linear and logical thought process stems from a narrow interpretation of writing as a medium, focusing exclusively on persuasive and expository writing while ignoring the other forms writing may take, such as prose fiction (629). Yet even as Halverson points to media content as an important factor to shaping language bias, the variety of content or social contexts in a text does not change some traits unique to writing. For example, Ong writes that even in creative writing, "the writer has to anticipate how much detail readers are willing and able to settle for" ("Literacy," 3). In other words, the writer must still imagine his or her reader in ways a speaker does not have to. And the writer still must compose in private while the speaker acts in accordance with the current social situation. Halverson's critique, though useful, does not account for these social complexities involved in

composition, oral or written.

In his review of Jarratt's *Rereading the Sophists*, James D. Williams critiques her references to Ong and Havelock's theories as a "well-known fallacy" (536). To demonstrate this critique, he adds that Olson, whom Halverson criticizes, had revised his position on literacy in 1987, five years after Ong had published *Orality and Literacy*. However, Williams' critique is not wholly justified. Though Olson's 1987 project—which involved examining literacy practices among children—states reservations on the impact of literacy, it is hardly conclusive. The researchers write that children's competencies in using language do not "arise solely from practice in reading and writing but rather from the oral language practices of more literate parents and teachers" (Olson and Torrance 145). While the researchers suggest limitations to literacy influence, the results do not deny literacy as a factor to shaping language competence. In addition, the fact "literate parents" are included as factors implies an indirect tie to literacy as the common denominator in shaping language usage. This can hardly be considered a sound rebuttal to Ong's theories, in which case, Williams' criticism of Jarratt is diminished due to this problematic citation. As such, these arguments disputing Ong's theories of media and consciousness prove insufficiently persuasive for invalidating this inquiry. This does not prove Ong right, but it does suggest his credibility is satisfactory for systematically applying his theories.

### **Application: The Sophistic Mind**

In the following chapter, this inquiry continues with an investigation of the sophists' media context. This next chapter serves three purposes as they relate to this inquiry. Firstly, this investigation gives further illustration of how oral and literate cultures manifest their unique characteristics. Secondly, and more importantly,

understanding the media effects of the sophists is a means to better understanding the sophists themselves as participants in a period when literacy was still emerging. Lastly, because the sophists are cited as the authorities of the neo-sophists, this investigation forms the basis for understanding the media context of the neo-sophists, being, according to Ong, in a stage of secondary orality. This investigation operates from the premise that the sophists exist in a transitory media context between orality and literacy.

### **III. THE SOPHISTIC MIND: MOVING FROM ORALITY TO LITERACY**

#### **Methods and Limits**

This chapter operates from the premise that the sophists existed in a transitory media context between orality and literacy. This transitory media context manifests itself through the hybrid nature of the sophistic art of oratory. Ong argues that rhetoric, traditionally treated as the invention of the sophists, “could never have been so reflectively prepared for or accounted for” without the technology of writing to systematize it (*Orality*, 108). This section entails applying Ong’s characteristics to the sophists and their works. There are some important limitations to this analysis to address before proceeding. First, this investigation is be limited to examining the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias with occasional references to less prominent sophists. Second, of the sophists included in this analysis, only Gorgias has complete works that have survived, although Protagoras may be the more famous due to his well known axioms. As such, much of this investigation relies on findings from the Platonic dialogues featuring the sophists.

Regarding the first limitation, Protagoras and Gorgias are the most relevant to this particular analysis because these two are the focus of the neo-sophists, whom are to be examined in a later chapter. In addition, although the sophists were a diverse group of teachers, their individual ideologies are more relevant to a philosophical inquiry than a rhetorical inquiry. Conversely, the relativism and interest in rhetoric that they all shared is of more importance to studying their media context. For this reason, the breadth of sophists examined in this inquiry is of less consequence than it would be in a philosophical inquiry. Regarding the second limitation, although Plato’s dialogues are not primary sources and are largely antagonistic towards the sophists, they are widely cited

among scholars as representative of the sophists' positions. These scholars include Havelock, W. C. K. Guthrie, John Dillon and Tania Gergel, and the neo-sophists themselves. To supplement the limited resources on the sophists, this chapter also draws from these scholars to supplement the findings.

Another point to make concerns the role of Socrates in the dialogues to be examined. To highlight the distinct media traits of the sophists, this chapter contrasts the techniques of these teachers with those of Socrates and Plato. The issue to address here, however, is identifying when Socrates's words are his own or Plato's. Because the sophists featured in the dialogues are representing the real sophists themselves, so Socrates, for the most part, is treated as Plato's mouthpiece countering the sophist's view. For simplicity, this investigation examines four distinct characteristics of the sophists: their roles in the poetic tradition, their concern for situation, their relativism and skepticism, and their agonistic approaches to rhetoric. These traits have been chosen as subjects of focus because, being commonalities among the sophists, they allow for treating the sophists as a group sharing a common media context. In each of these sections, the oral and literate traits discussed in the previous chapter are applied to identify where the sophists manifest orality and literacy in the texts examined.

### ***Mythos* and the Poetic Tradition**

The sophists' involvement in the poetic tradition is a key demonstration of the additive, aggregative, and redundant qualities Ong associates with oral culture. It should be noted that Havelock disputes placing the sophists within the poetic tradition. Instead, he argues, Plato "counts them among his allies in attacking the poets" (8) as they are part of the transition into literacy, departing from the aggregative qualities that characterize poetic performances. To Havelock's point, it is true the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias

cite the poets more for illustration than for authority, and their skepticism of the gods poses important problems to placing them within the tradition of the beloved Homer. Yet to say they were Plato's allies in attacking the poets is a step too far, for where Plato adamantly attacks Homer and Hesiod in Book II of *The Republic* (49-55), there are multiple occasions where the sophists deliberately glean from the poets for their rhetorical exploits. Guthrie points out that the sophists regularly put on displays at the great festivals of Olympia, demonstrating that "they considered themselves part of the tradition of the poets and rhapsodies." He observes further that Hippias and Gorgias's purple robes—which they wore regularly—were the customary garb of the poets performing (42). These traits distinguish the sophists from Socrates and Plato, for both preferred dialectic between individuals to the public flourishes the sophists were so fond of.

Despite their participation in an old oral tradition, it would be misleading to call the sophists traditional in the same way Ong describes oral cultures. This should be expected considering their precarious media context. Concerning religion, the sophists were skeptical of the Greek gods and were complicit in dissolving the faith of the Athenian youth (Durant 9). They evidently had little interest in preserving these ancient traditions. Nonetheless, perhaps the most important demonstration of oral aggregation among the sophists is their practice of *mythos*, or storytelling. This is significant because, according to Ong, *mythos*—which is associated with Homeric myths—derived from the aggregative formulas, or epithets, that perfected story recitation in oral culture. The best known example of *mythos* in sophistic rhetoric is from Plato's *Protagoras*.

The dialogue is set in the home of Callias where Socrates and Protagoras are debating in front of a group of Athenians. When Socrates asks Protagoras to demonstrate

why anyone is qualified to advise on matters of virtue (*arête*), the sophist begins his discourse with a rendition of the Prometheus myth. While the story would have been well known to the assembly, Protagoras makes some alterations. His story recounts Prometheus's theft of cunning—one of Athena's gifts—to prevent human extinction, and he also recounts Zeus's response to Prometheus's actions. Unlike the traditional Ionian myth, however, his version emphasizes Zeus's gift of conscience and justice to the humans as a means to preserve their race. Furthermore, he omits Prometheus's theft of fire, Zeus's ensuing punishment of Prometheus, and the creation of Pandora (Plato 320c-323a). With this modified myth, Protagoras argues that everyone has virtue because it has been distributed equally to all by the gods.

Ong explains that this practice of modifying *mythos* according to the occasion was common practice in oral culture: “In primary oral cultures the epic poet or other narrator actually shapes any given rendition of his narrative to the living response of the audience” (*Interfaces*, 312). Where the Athenians are familiar with the myth Protagoras has chosen, the sophist modifies it to fit the given topic of discussion. Yet Protagoras maintains the formulaic structure of the myth: humans are helpless in their early development; Prometheus steals divine gifts on behalf of the humans; Zeus produces the remedy for Prometheus's actions. As such, Protagoras is still acting within the traditional mindset of oral culture where storytelling is a method of conveying knowledge. Yet it should be noted his practice of poetic *mythos* is problematic considering his self-professed skepticism of the gods. This apparent epistemological dissonance is also related to the sophists' transitory media context and will be examined in a later section.

Gorgias's practice of *mythos* is not as explicit as Protagoras—who specifically frames his argument as a “story”—yet his speech *Encomium of Helen* is a prime example



of channeling the Athenian oral tradition for rhetorical purposes. Stylistically, this speech also demonstrates clear use of aggregative formulas. The introduction to his text is particularly revealing:

What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming.

Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praisable and to praise the blameable. (Bizzell & Herzberg 44)

This excerpt illustrates the sophistic mastery of aggregation through parallelism. Gorgias begins with a series of aggregative formulas relating a concrete object with its proper ideal (i.e. its abstract). These formulas are aids to recitation, which are appropriate given *Encomium* is a speech. Furthermore, Gorgias's demonstrates strong ties to the oral tradition through his preference for conjunctions of addition versus subordination.

Though this excerpt is two sentences, it include nine "ands," which reveals a preference for the convenience of the speaker as the repetitive *and* allows for a cadence constructive to oral delivery. In addition, however, this excerpt entails rhythmic patterns characteristic of the poetic tradition.

Examining these devices requires a particular look at his text. In this translation of the same excerpt, editors John Dillon and Tania Gergel have presented Gorgias's text in quasi-poetic form in order to illustrate how it likely affected its hearers:

The adornment of a city      is manpower  
of a body      beauty,  
of a soul,      wisdom

of an action,    virtue  
of a speech,    truth  
and the opposites of these make for disarray.  
Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object  
should be honoured, if praiseworthy, with praise  
and incur, if unworthy, blame,  
for it is in equal error and mistake  
to blame the praiseable    and to praise the blameable.

Written in this format, the aforementioned aggregative formulas become more pronounced; the line breaks and spacing highlight Gorgias's formulaic relationship of concrete-abstract. But these breaks and spaces are also suggestive of the vocal inflections in the sophist's speech. Visually, the virtue identified in each relationship is placed at the end and receives emphasis. In addition, the binaries listed in the second half are constructed so that the stress falls on each object (i.e. "*Man* and *woman* and *speech* and *deed* and *city* and *object*"). These formulaic features are also characteristic of oral methods of recitation. Yet even though these traits in the *Encomium* are characteristic of oral culture, this text is also indicative of the influence of literacy.

Gorgias's style is distinct due to the frequency of his poetic devices. George Kennedy asserts that the sophist utilized poetic devices to an "unprecedented degree" (qtd. in Scenters-Zapico 353). Considering Gorgias's historical position, however, this makes sense. Where writing allows for visual inspection of speech, Gorgias could attain the objective distance and time necessary to incorporate these devices to such an extraordinary degree. As such, these traits in the *Encomium* are signs of conserving an old poetic tradition while perfecting it to a degree never seen before through writing.

## Oratory and Situation

The sophistic eye for their social situation is key to reconciling the paradox of their skepticism of the divine and their participation in the poetic tradition. More significant to an Ongian analysis, their concern for circumstance and immediate surroundings is indicative of their homeostatic and situational mindset. Practicing a sort of nomadic lifestyle as traveling teachers, the sophists would have been familiar with the idiosyncrasies of each culture they encountered. Protagoras's practice of *mythos* in Plato's dialogue is a prime example of this shifting according to situation. Being in Athens, it seems Protagoras understands his whereabouts when he chooses to begin his discourse with a story, stories being the traditional means to relating ideas and values in the oral tradition. In telling the Prometheus myth, therefore, Protagoras may be better understood as not so much acting within his own tradition but within the tradition of his audience. This is important when accounting for his professed skepticism of the gods, a point that indicates Protagoras is recalling a myth whose veracity he himself doubts. It appears, therefore, that in Plato's dialogue, Protagoras's participation in the poetic tradition is driven more by his audience than his personal investment in the cultural values associated with *mythos*. This investigation explores the sophistic skepticism further in a later section.

The sophists also demonstrate a focus on the situation in their encounters with Socrates. It is Socrates who insists Protagoras move from the myth (which is hardly ever mentioned again) to abstract reasoning and definitions. In typical Socratic fashion, he gives his "one small problem" to address, and that is the definition of virtue. The rest of the dialogue consists of piecing together and disassembling this puzzle of definitions and abstracts, and Protagoras at several points becomes increasingly averse to answering

Socrates's questions. In one such instance, Socrates asks the sophist whether he calls good that which is not beneficial to man. A flustered Protagoras replies that "So varied and many-sided a thing is goodness, that even here the same thing is good for the outside of the human body, and very bad for the inside" (334b). Protagoras's reply is once more characteristic of the oral world through his apparent connection with the human lifeworld, for his answer relates to the everyday interactions with the physical world. He is implying that Socrates's question of what is beneficial is a fruitless inquiry because Socrates's abstraction offers no earthly context for an appropriate answer, such as whether the object is beneficial to men or to horses. Protagoras is focused on the circumstantial, the situational, Socrates on the universal, the abstract. This focus on the situation among the sophists may derive from their interest in rhetoric over philosophy, for the sophists had to be aware of their physical surroundings in order to identify appropriate social contexts for their rhetorical exploits. In addition, this focus is indicative of the homeostasis that Ong attributes to the oral mind. What matters is the given situation, the here and the now; abstractions simply remove the mind from immediate concerns.

Of course, Socrates is not always in the clouds, and the sophist is not always on the ground. In the *Gorgias*, it is Socrates who questions Callicles's assertion that the "better" and "more intelligent" person "rules over and has a greater share than his inferiors" (490a). When Socrates asks whether the "better" weavers should have the best clothes and the "better" cobblers the best shoes, Callicles irately responds, "By the gods! You simply don't let up on your continual talk of shoemakers and cleaners, cooks and doctors, as if our discussion were about them!" (491a). Yet the point is made that Callicles has not defined his abstract terms in relation to the human lifeworld.

Similarly, in the *Protagoras* itself, Socrates shows himself more in touch with the

human lifeworld when he asks Protagoras what Hippocrates will learn from him. Speaking to Hippocrates, Protagoras responds in the abstract: “Young man . . . if you associate with me, this is the benefit you will gain: the very day you become my pupil you will go home better, and the same the next day; and every day you will continue to progress” (Plato 318a). Dissatisfied, Socrates asks for a direct answer as to *what* Hippocrates would become “better” in, suggesting painting or flute-playing as examples. In this instance, it is Socrates who is closer to the human lifeworld, speaking according to the situation, and Protagoras who is the more abstract. This may appear problematic for an Ongian analysis, but it is actually fitting for a transitory media context, for where literacy is still emerging in a predominantly oral society, there will be a mixture of the oral and literate mindsets in both Socrates and Protagoras. Yet even as the two mutually dip in the consciousness of the oral and of the literae, Socrates and Protagoras have important epistemological differences that, holistically, distinguish one as the more situational and the other the more abstract. This will be examined in the following section.

### **Relativism and Skepticism**

Amid the diverse ideas that defined the sophists, Guthrie writes that they all shared “a scepticism according to which knowledge could only be relative to the perceiving standpoint” (50). Here, evidently, is a key point where the sophists part from Socrates and Plato, whose mission is to discern truth transcendent of human operations. It is this differing epistemology that inevitably makes Socrates and Plato the more abstract in the sophist-Plato opposition. One reason for this difference between the sophists and these philosophers was the sophists’ aforementioned skepticism of the divine. Protagoras is recorded as saying, “I am not in a position to know either that they [the gods] exist, or

that they do not exist” (qtd. in Dillon and Gergel 21). This also is position rejected by Plato, who condemned the poets not because they believed in the gods, but because, in his view, they mischaracterized the gods that were collectively the source of the good (*The Republic*, 383b-c). This strengthens the assertion that Socrates and Plato mutually focus on the abstract; the sophistic skepticism of the gods draws them to look to the physical world for guidance.

Guthrie writes that the sophists owed much of their epistemological viewpoint to the writings of the pre-socratics (46). Whereas the pre-socratics were among the earliest writers in ancient Greece, the sophists may be perceived as the backlash of the traditional oral mind. The sophists did not share the pre-socratic fascination with natural sciences, but the natural philosophers’ “challenge to the evidence of the senses” did much to provoke the sophists’ skepticism of the metaphysical. As a result, “the Sophists abandoned the idea of a permanent reality behind appearances, in favor of an extreme phenomenism, relativism and subjectivism” (47). This antithetical reaction from the sophists is an essential part to linking their epistemology to their media context. Their attempt to give credibility to the senses—a point Plato also rejected—and to approach knowledge through a more anthropological lens aligns, once more, with a closeness to the human lifeworld. Moreover, this approach is homeostatic, rejecting the abstract—and the written archive of the pre-socratics—in favor of the immediate. In this sense, therefore, the sophistic skepticism of the divine may be read as part of the residual influence of orality in a transitory media context.

Perhaps the best illustration of sophistic relativism is in Protagoras’s thesis, “Man is the measure of all a things” (qtd. in Dillon and Gergel 10). In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates explains this thesis as meaning nothing can be measured without man as the

point of reference or, as Guthrie writes, “the perceiving standpoint.” What is remarkable about this point is that it bears the marks of the oral and the literate minds at once. It is the conservative oral value of consensus that undergirds this statement, but the statement is still an abstraction, an implicit universal that ought to apply to every man and, therefore, exempt him from having to consult the consensus for guidance. Such an exemption is an essential trait of what McLuhan called the fragmented man, the “disassociated . . . literate Westerner” (20). Still, the aforementioned value of consensus is not satisfactory for Socrates and Plato. As Socrates retorts to Polus in the *Gorgias*, “I do know how to produce one witness to whatever I’m saying, and that’s the man I’m having a discussion with; the majority I disregard” (Plato 38). For Protagoras, truth is relative to the people and the situation; for Socrates and Plato, truth is constant with or without the many behind it. And in that distinction is the progress of literacy on the consciousness moving from Protagoras to Socrates.

In examining this progress in ancient Greece, Havelock observes that the pre-socratics, the sophists, and Socrates all shared a common attempt to “discover and practice abstract reasoning” and because “Socratic dialectic pursued the goal with more energy, . . . it was along this path and this alone that the new educational programme must be conducted” (286). Whereas both the sophists and Socrates evidently practiced situational and abstract thinking, they differed in their purpose for navigating between these two approaches. When Protagoras makes his exasperated response regarding the “varied and many-sided” nature of goodness, he is pointing out the futility of identifying goodness as an absolute abstract. In contrast, when Socrates asks Callicles what he means by “better,” his purpose is to make definitions clear so as to more efficiently arrive at what is universal. Therefore, for Socrates and Plato, the charge against situation as guide

was essential for creating the independence of the individual mind. In direct opposition, the importance of situation to the sophists made conflict and competition central to discourse as persuasion was the means to creating consensus. An epistemic rhetoric was an agonistic rhetoric.

### **The Sophistic *Agon***

Ong observes that oral cultures are distinct from literate cultures for their agonistic verbal performances. Much of this has to do with human presence in oral cultures versus the absence of the writer in a literate culture. Ong explains that “Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another” (43-44). This is observable in a literate society, where writing is the primary medium by which knowledge is distributed. But in ancient Athens of Protagoras and Gorgias’s time, oratory still dominated education and politics. So whereas writers may respond to each other only in each other’s absence, being of a more individualized culture, two speakers may respond only in each other’s presence—that is, before the electronic age. It is this social setting that makes the oral society more agonistic than the literate society, and the sophists exploited it to their advantage.

The epistemological uncertainty that characterized the sophists was instrumental in shaping their means of seeking knowledge. Having determined that universalism was unattainable, the sophists relied on competition of power and verbal battles as a way to create consensus. Discussing Nietzsche’s reading of the sophists, Consigny refers to this competitive attitude as the Greek *agon*: “[T]he Greeks fostered a plurality of competitors and geniuses and refused to countenance the authority of any one voice . . . It is in the contest of this integral relationship between creativity and competition that Nietzsche situates the fifth-century sophists (9-10). Guthrie corroborates this reading of the



sophists. They were known for their ambition to outperform the poets in the Olympian games. He contrast this attitude with that of the historian Thucydides, who wrote his account of the Peloponnesian War not as a “‘competition-piece for a single occasion’ but a possession for all time” (qtd. in Guthrie 43). In this illustration, Thucydides is manifesting the disinterested approach of literate culture whereas the sophists are acting within the struggle for knowledge in an oral culture.

Perhaps Protagoras best demonstrates the agonistic attitude of the sophists, for it is he who asserts one ought to “make the weaker case appear the stronger” (qtd. Bizzell and Herzberg 23). This statement reveals again the relativistic perspective of the sophists, for they had no qualms with arguing both sides of an argument as illustrated through the shifting stances in *Dissoi Logoi*. Such an approach Plato renounces in the *Phaedrus*: “I bring no compulsion to learn the art of speech on anyone who is ignorant of the truth” (47). The premise in Plato’s condemnation of the sophistic *agon* is that knowledge and meaning precede rhetoric whereas the sophist operates from the premise that rhetoric itself produces knowledge and, therefore, knowledge emerges from the rhetorician who is unbeaten. These differing approaches of the sophistic *agon* and platonic universalism becomes highly evident when Socrates and Protagoras dispute over their method of discourse in the *Protagoras*:

“Well, I’ve heard,” I [Socrates] said, “that you can speak at such length, when you choose to, that your speech never comes to an end, and then again you can be so brief on the same topic that no one could briefer. . . . So if you are going to have a discussion with me, use the latter method, that of brevity.”

“Socrates,” he said, “I’ve had verbal contests with a great many people, and if I had done what you tell me to do, and spoken according to the rules of my

antagonist, I should never have got the better of anyone, nor would the name of Protagoras have become known in Greece.” (28)

In this excerpt, there are several points that distinguish Protagoras and Socrates in terms of their media context. First, Protagoras’s concern, admittedly, is that Socrates’s method puts him at a disadvantage. In other words, he is concerned not so much with whether Socrates’s method will hinder productivity—that is, the possibility of discovering truth—but with his being hindered from getting the better of his opponent. This concern is made obvious from his concluding remark that “the name of Protagoras” would never have been famous if he had conceded the process of discourse to his opponent. Protagoras, evidently, is acting within the agonistic framework of the oral mind. Moreover, it should be noted Socrates is practicing the analytical thought process more typical of literate culture by emphasizing brevity over the ornamentation and aggregation characteristic of long speeches.

Another important example of the sophistic *agon* is in Gorgias’s *Encomium*. Whereas there seems to be no commentary or record of controversy surrounding Gorgias’s defense of Helen, his position is certainly countercultural for his time as he himself observes: “[I]t is right to refute those who rebuke Helen, a woman about whom the testimony of inspired poets has become univocal and unanimous as had the ill omen of her name” (Bizzell and Herzberg 44). Gorgias’s motive for defending Helen is unknown, but his motive and sincerity are irrelevant as it pertains to his media context. The fact the text is a speech indicates he would have made his case in public, which reveals his willingness to lock horns with the Athenian tradition. In opening his case, Gorgias first acknowledges that the culture, shaped by the poets, has historically condemned Helen for instigating the Trojan War. From the beginning, therefore, Gorgias

is participating in a rhetorical conflict in which he is the disputer to the consensus. This setup is typical of an agonistic culture. But what may not be as clear, though it is certainly more significant—is that Gorgias’s critique of the conventional interpretation of Helen is indicative of the influence of literacy.

Gorgias’s commentary on the Helen myth takes many more liberties than Protagoras’s of the Prometheus myth. He writes that his purpose is to “free the accused [Helen] from blame” and from the ignorance of her accusers (Bizzell & Herzberg 44), but his speech is most remembered for his commentary of the bewitching power of language, a theme consistent in many of his discourses. He asserts Helen is not to blame for the Trojan War because she was overcome by “the influence of speech” from Paris just as she would be “ravished by the force of the mighty” (45). Such an interpretation can hardly be described as part of the traditional mindset of oral culture where memory—memory of a traditional interpretation, in this case—is supreme in governing the consensus view. But in critiquing a cultural viewpoint as expressed in poetry, Gorgias is practicing an early form of literary criticism. This notion poses the possibility of a paradoxical consciousness behind Gorgias’s speech. On the one hand, he is acting from the oral tendency to be empathetic and participatory, as if his listeners should feel personally connected to Helen and her plight. On the other hand, writing down his speech seems to afford him the objective distance to make his critique in a disinterested manner. Therefore, Gorgias is operating within media hybridity, responding agonistically to a text in the oral tradition but applying the objective distance through writing to make conclusions outside the consensus view.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this exploration of sophistic rhetoric suggests that while the

sophists are evidently in a period of media transition, their methods and epistemology suggests that they operate more in the oral mindset than the literate when contrasted with Plato and his Socrates. This may be due to a difference in field of study as well as chronology. The sophists identified as professors of rhetoric whereas Plato's *Phaedrus* consistently reject rhetoric as having epistemic value in and of itself. As professors of rhetoric, the sophists acted to be more in tune with their audiences, the oral communities of ancient Greece; Plato, conversely, sought to transform it, perhaps to push it forward to its destiny as a literate culture. Whatever the case, this notion of a transitory media context is important to this inquiry of secondary orality. In the first place, the technological changes prompted by electronic media are still underway, which implies the West is in a transitory media context of its own. Secondly, the peculiar hybridity of secondary orality as an orality emerging out of literate culture suggests that such a media context will produce a mixture of traits resembling both primary orality and literacy. The following chapter explores the literature and possible traits of this media context.

## IV. WHAT IS SECONDARY ORALITY?

### Overview of Ong's Theory

The difficulty to defining secondary orality is due to the scarce commentary available on the subject from Ong. Ong does not have a complete work specifically dedicated to analyzing secondary orality. This chapter draws largely from the fragmented commentary he does provide and other literature discussing his theories. To begin defining secondary orality, this chapter opens with the factors necessary to producing secondary orality prior to discussing the characteristics of the culture it creates.

First, secondary orality as Ong defines it is identified as a resurgence of orality. Second, it is a product of electronic media, specifically the telephone, radio, and television—and “various kinds of sound tape” (134). Third, it originates exclusively within literate cultures (*Orality*, Ong 11). These traits must all be listed together before explanation because they are reliant upon each other. Regarding the effect of electronic media on culture, Ong explains that the study of oral versus literate cultures has been made possible because electronic media have “sensitized us to the earlier contrasts between writing and orality” (*Orality*, 3). He further asserts that electronic media rely on literacy for their existence, for their functions are defined and executed from the analytical approaches of the literate culture that invented them. For this reason, literate culture must precede secondary orality.

If this is the case, then secondary orality is not a mere continuation of primary orality but a resurgence of orality since its media context of origin had previously departed from primary orality. So even as secondary orality emerges from literate culture, it manifests characteristics that resemble both literate and oral cultures. In his 1971 work, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, Ong explains how this culture is both familiar and

new: “Secondary orality is founded on—though it departs from—the individualized introversion of the age of writing, print, and rationalism which intervened between it and primary orality” (285). Judging from Ong’s definition, there can be no situation where secondary orality immediately succeeds primary orality because the participants of secondary orality are traditionally of literate culture. However, as one critic, Sheila J. Nayar, observes, there are some difficulties to this definition of secondary orality in light of the varying degrees of literacy among cultures encountering electronic media. Therefore, there are some ambiguities to Ong’s theory to address before proceeding with the cultural characteristics of secondary orality.

### **Limitations to Secondary Orality as a Media Context**

In an essay responding to Ong’s theory, Nayar critiques the ambiguity surrounding Ong’s use of “we” and “us” when discussing secondary orality. Although Ong commits significant portions of *Orality and Literacy* to examining East Asian literacy (specifically in his fourth chapter, “Writing Restructures Consciousness”), his work largely focuses on media changes in Western civilization, that is, the Greco-Roman and medieval heritage of Europe and the United States. So when Ong discusses secondary orality, it is unclear whether the references to “we” and “us” are limited to the literate Western world or refer to a global community. Nayar discusses other problems with this ambiguity: “What of the ‘we’ who are, in spite of electronic culture, still oral or only rudimentarily literate and who are thus . . . *not* prone towards analytic reflectiveness?” (221). Nayar is pointing out that electronic culture is a global phenomenon regardless of whether its participants are traditionally of oral or literate cultures. As such, if Ong is claiming that secondary orality as a culture derives from the analytical nature of literate cultures, then this culture does not include primarily oral

communities that encounter electronic media.

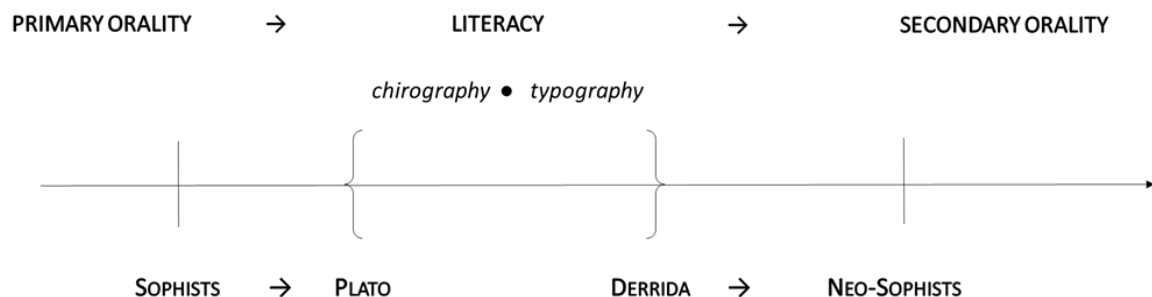
Nayar argues for expanding the application of *secondary orality* as a term. Instead of interpreting secondary orality within “the confines of the western literacy tradition and of the voice as the major locus of orality,” she argues, “one can indubitably recognize that ‘often-told oral stor[ies]’ . . . have persisted in the *film narrative*” (Nayar 223; emphasis in original). Nayar demonstrates this claim by observing the prevalence of primary orality in films originating from cultures with higher residual orality, specifically Indian Bollywood films. By Ong’s definition, these films would not be included as manifestations of secondary orality. Therefore, Nayar asserts, Ong’s definition of secondary orality as traditionally applied is too narrow for global application.

To account for Nayar’s critique, this analysis of secondary orality operates from two premises. The first is that secondary orality as applied in this inquiry is a phenomenon limited to cultures transitioning from print—even more specifically, *phonetic* print—to electronic media and is, therefore, not a global phenomenon. As such, this inquiry is, admittedly, concerned largely with Western civilization. The second premise is that to account for the influence of electronic media on a global scale, a new term should be coined to distinguish the global phenomenon from secondary orality. In other words, rather than broadening the application of secondary orality to account for the effects of electronic media in primarily oral cultures, scholarship will benefit from framing the influence of electronic media on a global scale with a term distinct from secondary orality.

### **Derrida: The Closing Parenthesis to Western Literacy**

Although Ong identifies electronic media as the instigators of secondary orality, he makes no hypothesis as to when this media context begins. One may argue secondary

orality begins when certain electronic media, such as the radio, were first invented. This approach poses more difficulties than the argument that Greek literacy begins with the appearance of the alphabet. Not only is there the question of when the radio was culturally interiorized—that is, part of the everyday experience of the average American citizen, for instance—but the choice of medium is arbitrary since the earlier invention of the telephone (or even the phonograph) or the later invention of the television (a particular interest of McLuhan) may also qualify as signifiers of secondary orality since they involve the human voice in mass media. More importantly, the focus of this analysis is identifying signs of when media effects are noticed within the culture, as Plato noticed the effects of writing, rather than when they first manifest, as the effect of writing did among the sophists. Lastly, because the West is still undergoing a transition into the electronic age, identifying the end of literacy may be a more appropriate method to understanding secondary orality rather than attempting to mark the beginning of the electronic age. Where Plato is treated as the opening parenthesis to Western literacy, this section explores Derrida as Plato’s counterpart signifying the end of literacy. This link is represented in **Figure 2** below. Acting as the closing parenthesis to Western literacy, Derrida completes the bridge that links the sophists and Plato to the neo-sophists, creating a chain of historical figures that signify the media changes in Western academia.



**Figure 2** Derrida as the closing parenthesis of Western literacy



It should be said here that just as the sophists read and wrote before Plato, so the neo-sophists continue to read and write after Derrida. Hence, the “end of Western literacy” signifies not the end of writing as a practice but the point when writing has reached its peak as the dominant cultural influence. McLuhan and Derrida mutually draw attention to this displacement of the printed word. In *Massage*, for example, McLuhan points out the futility of educating the child of the electronic age by means based in literate culture (18). Similarly, Derrida notes in *Dissemination* that “the form of the ‘book’ is now going through a period of a general upheaval” (3). Both also make similar observations about the shifting consciousness of the West. In an earlier lecture, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida refers to the twentieth century as a period of “decentering,” that is, the displacement of the West as the cultural center of the world (*Writing*, 280). This point hearkens to McLuhan’s observation that the electric circuitry that characterizes modern media, being “equally available in the farmhouse and the Executive Suite, permits any place to be a center” (*Understanding Media*, 47). These excerpts are reflective of the social effects of media during their time. Chronologically, this commonality between Derrida and McLuhan makes sense, for Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, arguably his most famous work, and McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage* were both published in 1967. However, there are some important differences between Derrida and McLuhan that suggest Derrida is more appropriate as Plato’s counterpart.

In the first place, Derrida has a direct connection with the neo-sophists that McLuhan does not share. Whereas McLuhan’s position as a phenomenon of popular culture makes him a viable candidate to marking the end of literacy, Derrida fits better as Plato’s counterpart, for he not only shares McLuhan’s awareness of media implications in

the twentieth century but is also cited by the neo-sophists as their philosophic authority against the Western tradition, a tradition that begins with Plato. Jarratt cites Derridean deconstruction as the “most significant challenge to Western philosophy” that has been instrumental to reviving sophistic studies (*Rereading*, 7); Crowley accredits Derrida for uncovering the “poverty of current-traditional rhetoric” (“On Gorgias,” 279); and Neel calls his case for sophistry in composition studies “frankly and overtly parasitic on Derrida’s canon” (109). In addition to his connection to the neo-sophists, however, Derrida’s distinct observations and style reveal he represents the closing stage of literacy more effectively than McLuhan does.

Derrida is known for his criticism of *logocentrism*, a term he coins to signify the privileged status of speech and the “debasement of writing” in Western discourse (*Grammatology*, 3). This preference, Derrida continues, stems from the assumption that writing signifies speech—an assumption Plato demonstrates in the *Phaedrus* through Lysias’s written speech—and is, therefore, tertiary in a chain where thought is expressed in speech which is then expressed in writing. Assumed to be tertiary, writing is of low quality. Derrida rejects this notion, arguing that “there is no linguistic sign before writing” (14), in which case, writing signifies thought, not speech, and so precedes speech. This claim has important implications as it concerns Derrida’s media context for the notion that writing precedes speech, in effect, reverses the traditional chronology of orality preceding literacy. Considering Ong’s idea that electronics have revived orality in the twentieth century, Derrida’s reversal of chronology seems appropriate to the age of secondary orality where a type of orality is succeeding literacy. Yet unlike Ong, Derrida never suggests the West is undergoing a revival of orality in Western culture. His criticism of logocentrism is meant to uphold writing, and this intent is evident when

contrasting Derrida and McLuhan's remarkable writing styles.

Translator of *Dissemination* Barbara Johnson notes that Derrida's syntax is "unspeakable," conforming to the grammatical conventions of writing but hardly comfortable to read aloud due to regular ambiguity, dense punctuation, and lengthy parentheticals. McLuhan's is the exact opposite. Mark Leverette observes that McLuhan did not write his books but dictated "his thoughts as someone else transcribed them. This is one reason for the non-linear, hypertextual style of most of the texts" (347). In short, McLuhan is quotable (e.g. "The medium is the message"), and Derrida is not. As such, one may argue McLuhan's style is more reflective of the interactive oral world whereas Derrida's is more rooted in the cerebral literate world. Simultaneously, however, in dictating his texts to a transcriber, McLuhan is operating from the traditional assumption that speech precedes writing, which, having originated from Plato, is characteristic of traditionally literate culture. Derrida, meanwhile, writes from the assumption that writing precedes speech, and this assumption resembles Ong's assertion that secondary orality proceeds from literacy. In both scenarios, Derrida is effectively separated from the residual influence of primary orality. Such a phenomenon places Derrida in the closing stage of literacy as the West moves into an age of a new orality, the speech that succeeds writing. For these reasons, where Plato signifies the opening parenthesis to Western literacy, Derrida signifies the closing parenthesis marking the conclusion of Western literacy and the beginning of secondary orality.

### **The Secondarily Oral Mind**

The following section is a brief explanation of the characteristics defining secondary orality. In one commentary on secondary orality, Ong writes that this new media context "has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its

fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas” (134). In this excerpt, Ong identifies four commonalities between secondary orality and primary orality: participatory, communal, homeostatic, and aggregative. Since the initial premise behind secondary orality as a concept is a resurgence of oral culture, traits similar to primary orality are expected. Yet in none of his commentary does Ong discuss the individual effects of the electronic media he lists. In this respect, McLuhan is included to qualify a number of these traits with more specific imagery. Meanwhile, there are also some traits of this media context that bear resemblances to writing, for literacy is the media context preceding secondary orality.

Ong explores this link to literacy occasionally but McLuhan does not. To supplement Ong’s observations, therefore, this analysis includes commentary from Derrida. Derrida plays an important role in understanding secondary orality because he contests McLuhan’s notion that electronic media bring back orality. In a 1982 interview, he expresses his disagreement with McLuhan, asserting that electronic media are extensions of writing, not “the alphabetic writing down, but in the new sense of those writing machines that we’re using now (e.g. the tape recorder).” Derrida’s perspective draws from his broader definition of writing articulated in “Signature Event Context.” Where writing is any legible record produced in the absence of the receiver, electronics are not excluded as instruments of writing. Tape recording, for instance, may be included as a form of writing since it is a record that is “legible” through the ear. As such, Derrida would likely disagree with the logic of Ong’s term “secondary orality.” However, as stated in the introduction, this inquiry is based upon Ong’s definition of literacy as derived from the traditional alphabetic system. But as shown in the following analysis, Derrida’s connection between electronic media and writing enriches Ong’s notion of

secondary orality insofar as it illustrates secondary orality's connection to literacy. The following is a list of traits identified collectively through these works.

*Reliant on literacy*

As explained earlier, secondary orality is directly reliant on literacy. That is, for participants to have full access to the secondarily oral experience, they must be literate. Ong explains this is due to the essential role writing plays in creating this media context. Whereas literate cultures are responsible for the invention of such devices as the radio and the television, writing is also intimately involved in using these devices: "There is nothing on radio or television, however oral, not subject to . . . chirographic and typographic control, which enters into program design, scripts, advertising, contractual agreements, diction, sentence structure, and countless other details" ("Literacy," 5). Ong is observing that the speech of secondary orality is not as autonomous as the speech of primary orality because it is directly attached to the literate world that precedes it. As such, even though oratory has become increasingly important in electronic broadcasting, its execution differs tremendously from the oratory of primary orality.

Speakers in primarily oral cultures rely on aggregative formulas, additive language, and redundancy as recitation aids. Speakers of secondary orality do not require these aids due to the presence of writing. Radio broadcasters often read from printed texts, and television anchors read from a teleprompter. For the users of radio and television, instructions and directives on the device—such as "power," "volume," and "frequency"—are labeled in writing, and the caption feature on television aids the listener's comprehension. These features are demonstrative of the cultural assumptions of their literate inventors. In her commentary on Ong's theory, Abigail Lambke asserts that these qualities of secondary orality make this media context more like a "literate orality"

than a resurgence of primary orality (210). This is essential to understanding secondary orality because whereas a primarily oral culture utilizes speech as the dominant medium out of necessity, a secondarily oral culture relies on literacy to effectively execute speech as a mass medium. In this respect, secondary orality has the physical capacities of orality but is conducted in the manner of a literate society.

Derrida and McLuhan share a common reliance on literacy in that they both depart from traditional forms of literate culture yet rely on the technology of literate culture to distribute their ideas. In McLuhan's case, while he criticizes traditional literate forms of education and dictates his work in traditionally oral fashion, he relies on the press to distribute his texts in mass. Similarly, Derrida's "Outwork" in *Dissemination* focuses particularly on the problems and inadequacies of the traditional form of the "book" and "preface" for his own line of scholarship, a point that will be discussed in detail shortly. Yet his work is printed in traditional book format as this is the familiar format in a literate society. As mentioned previously, both men compensate for this reliance on literate culture through their unorthodox styles. This demonstrates that even when secondary orality may utilize media familiar to literate culture, its manner of expression is often foreign. The following traits explore this foreignness further.

#### *Systematically spontaneous*

While electronic media rely on literacy for their existence, participants of secondary orality draw from literacy to create the spontaneity characteristic of primarily oral societies. In the electronic world, this spontaneity may take form in talk radio, stand-up comedy, or scheduled phone calls. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong explains that this spontaneity differs from that of primary orality because it is "planned," or intentional: "[T]hrough analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan

our happenings carefully. . . [so] they are thoroughly spontaneous” (Ong 134). Ong explains that this distinction is due to the influence of writing. Primarily oral cultures have no means of turning inward in analytical contemplation because the objective distance afforded by writing is not available. Participants of secondary orality, however, have a history of turning inward due to their connection to literacy, so they can examine *spontaneity* as an idea, an abstract, that is desirable.

The tension surrounding spontaneity in a secondarily oral culture, as Lambke observes, is that the intentionality involved in pursuing spontaneity makes the process a *planned* process. This becomes evident in the methods of impromptu electronic broadcasting. She explains that creating spontaneity requires scheduling a time for it, as in the case of making live and impromptu broadcasts at pre-determined times. In addition, where radio and television broadcasters may not always have their talk prepared word-for-word, they do have talking points arranged in linear fashion so that “while [they] can seem spontaneous the audience knows they are listening to a script” (212). McLuhan calls this the execution of “low-pressure” presentation via “high-pressure” organization (*Understanding Media*, 270). This is not limited to radio and television performance. A similar situation takes place in scheduled phone calls, particularly in the business world. The spontaneity of two-way conversation makes total planning impossible, yet the act of scheduling a conversation—and, thus, preparing for it—suggests the conversation is no longer completely spontaneous.

In the literary world, this systematic spontaneity looks a little different from that of radio and television performers. Derrida demonstrates a sort of systematic spontaneity through his effort to “escape” from the literature genre. While readers may refer to *Dissemination* as a “book,” Derrida rejects this label from the very beginning in the

opening statement: “This (therefore) will not have been a book” (3). The significance of this opening is not merely that Derrida denies a traditional label but also that he begins a scholarly work *in medias res*, a style more characteristic of narrative than of traditional linear scholarship. This trait is common in Derrida’s openings (e.g. entitling the first section in *Grammatology* as “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”; referring to “it” before its antecedent in opening the essay “Force and Signification.”) This approach leaves the reader to gradually sort through the text to orient him- or herself to its purpose. Derrida states his purpose for denying this label of “book” in asserting “the book form alone can no longer settle . . . the case of those writing processes which, in practically questioning that form, must also dismantle it” (3). The “book” is inadequate to articulate Derrida’s criticism of the “book” as form. Derrida cannot use the book to dismantle it, so he rejects the label altogether.

But Derrida does not state what form his work is if it is not a book. His prose reads as an exploration without a clear object, which is the mark of spontaneity. Yet the glaring tension in his attempt to transcend literature as a genre is in Derrida’s reliance on the systematic process of analysis and writing to make this transcendence take place. He indirectly expresses this tension in stating he “will not feign . . . either premeditation or improvisation” (3). The reality is that both of these processes are taking place simultaneously. Derrida’s effort to begin something new, something spontaneous—and he begins and rebegins his discourse again and again throughout this preface, or “Outwork”—is impeded by the traditional form of the “book” that he relies upon to distribute his “dismantling” of the book. Certainly, his dense prose obscures the systematization behind his seemingly spontaneous discourse. Yet the printed page exposes itself as a premeditated document. The reader knows the text is the product of the



writer's contemplation however spontaneous the writing seems.

This notion of planned spontaneity is essential to recognizing an element of superficiality in secondary orality: the effort to *appear* spontaneous produces in the speaker (who is also a writer) a heightened pretense. The literate speaker is an actor in a way the literate reader is not. Even if the audience is aware of the script involved in a program or a phone call or the thought involved in preparing a "book," the pretense from the speaker enables listeners and viewers to *experience* spontaneity even if it is not present.

*Aggregative for concision and efficiency*

As discussed in earlier chapters, aggregation involves communicating in rigid, repetitive syntactical formulas. Ong explains that these formulas are part of primary and secondary orality alike, but they serve completely different purposes in either case. Where poets of primary orality practice aggregation as an aid to memory (e.g. "clever Odysseus," "beautiful princess," and "solid rock"), participants of secondary orality use it mostly for more efficient communication. In *Rhetoric*, Ong illustrates this distinction through common legal phrases, such as "clear and present danger," "last clear chance," and "Possession is eleven points in the law" (297). These phrases, Ong explains, are not storage devices for memory but for conveying elaborate analyses without exploring particulars and defining terms. More current examples are particularly visible in the social and political realms as seen in common references to "police brutality," "Russian collusion," and "believe all women."

What is interesting about this practice of aggregation is its involvement of its audience. Where complicated ideas are shorted to frequently cited, simple phrases, the listener is expected to fill in the gaps to understand the deeper meaning communicated.

McLuhan notes that the formulaic aphorism is more characteristic of the electronic age than the premeditated and methodical style of writing because aphorisms “are incomplete and require participation in depth” (44). Similarly, where aggregation is practiced in secondary orality, the listeners must be familiar with and sort through the conversations, emotions, and details that are absent in the phrase “police brutality.” Yet even though this practice is reflective of the participatory nature of primary orality, its purpose is concision and efficiency in communication. Where there is an audience that can fill in the gaps, the speaker/writer may say/write more in a smaller space. This tie to efficiency and concision makes this aggregation simultaneously based in orality and literacy.

An example of this aggregation in the modern literary world is in various adaptations of Derrida’s binary oppositions. As previously noted, Derrida is not as quotable as McLuhan due to his dense prose, a style indicative of late-stage literacy. This aspect makes his work particularly difficult to read and explain in a less traditionally scholarly setting like the electronic world. Neel cynically describes Derrida’s style as “needlessly poor writing” (101). Yet Derridean deconstructive theory is culturally interiorized in modern English studies. As aids to explanation, therefore, adaptations of Derrida’s theories always reference “binary oppositions”—e.g. writing versus speech, practice versus theory, remedy versus poison (*Dissemination*, 4; 95-117)—as the objects of deconstruction. Like the legal terms Ong mentions in *Rhetoric*, these formulas do not exist as aids to recitation as in a primarily oral culture. Rather, they are simplifications of Derrida’s complex analyses of Western philosophy. Moreover, they signify Derrida’s nearness to secondary orality, for as Jarratt explains, his work exposes these binary oppositions as closed systems produced from writing (7). To identify these oppositions would require Derrida’s sensitivity to the effects of writing as a medium, a sensitivity

that, according to Ong, arises from the advent of electronic media. The next chapter discusses aggregation in these binary oppositions further.

*Participatory and intimate yet distant*

In one sense, radio and television have revived the participatory experience of a live audience. This is not to say live audiences were not a regular part of literate culture any more than this inquiry has suggested people did not read before Plato. Rather, this point concerns the nature of the experience produced through the mainstream media of a given time. In a literate culture, as discussed in the second chapter, reading and writing are private experiences that are more conducive to the contemplation and personal examination of an individualistic culture. This experience is particularly characteristic of the scholarly community. In a library, readers are separated from one another through the silent process reading a book requires; once one of them reads aloud, the barriers separating them vanish, and they become a community of listeners. Radio and television are devices that have broken such barriers that reading and writing create and turn entire households, restaurants, and classrooms into theaters. It is in this sense, as Ong states, that secondary orality has produced “a strong group sense” (*Orality*, 134) that reading and writing do not.

The communal sense that radio and television produce also allows for a higher level of participation on the part of listeners and viewers. This is particularly evident in a recorded live production. When watching a recorded performance on television, Lambke observes, “Audiences are shown pictures of studio audiences with whom they are supposed to identify, joining in their taped laughs” (211). In such a situation, the viewer’s emotional involvement through the television produces the illusion of personal presence. The viewer is part of a virtual community with whom he or she is participating. This

communal sense creates in its participants an emotional connection heightened from that of a literate culture. It is one thing to discover the stranger beside you has read the same book or paper; it is a more personal connection when two discover they had both been to the same event. Yet unlike in a primarily oral culture, participants may not have physically *been* at the same event since radio and television offer only the *illusion* of being somewhere. And here lies an important limit to secondary orality.

Despite this evident sense of community through radio and television, these media can only create one-way participation. In a live Athenian performance of *Sophocles*, the actors may sense the audience's reactions and respond accordingly. The senator addressing the legislative body in ancient Rome is in a similar circumstance. On the other hand, neither the anchorman on CNN nor the radio broadcaster on NPR has a live audience present to guide his or her performance. Even the senator in the United States Congress is aware of a "peopleless" camera in the room. The speaker's words hit the cold surface of the camera lens; the audience's reactions fall on deaf ears; and the performance continues uninterrupted. In this sense, secondary orality has some traits of literate culture. In "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," Ong explains that the writer is isolated where the orator is not, for the writer has no audience, no reactions to guide his or her process (5-6). Television and radio create a similar situation, for they, as Gunter Thomas observes, give their audiences "visual and oral presence without physical presence" (395). As a result, the best radio and television have to offer is one-way communication. Of course, it should be noted that telephone is clearly more conducive to two-way communication and "demands complete participation" (McLuhan 234), an important aspect that makes phone calls popular in radio and television programs. Yet this medium also resembles writing, just as Derrida observes, for it is usually limited to two participants, preserving the

individualism that characterizes literate culture, and it also lacks the physical presence that characterizes primary orality. In all these respects, while secondary orality allows for participation, it also produces physical distance from the human lifeworld.

*Homeostatic and archival*

A remarkable trait of secondary orality is that it emphasizes the past and the present moment simultaneously. This is due to a dual effect of electronic media. On the one hand, as noted in previous traits discussed, electronic media draw the user into the present moment due to its spontaneous and participatory effects. This illustrates Ong's point of the perishable nature of the spoken word. Telephone, radio, and television—all involving speech—require the listeners to be fully engaged so as not to miss any words. Simultaneously, electronic media have made sound *imperishable* through sound recording. Ong notes this effect in *Interfaces of the Word*: “The in-and-out relationship of television . . . is maximized with videotape, whereby a taped past performance can be played back into the present” (319).

Electronic media's capacity to record allows what would have been lost in a primarily oral culture to be preserved on tape (or via digital recording today). In another essay, “Information and/or Communication: Interactions,” Ong explains that just as writing has made speech exterior to the mind, so tape recording has made spoken words “things” that may be examined repeatedly (521). Derrida makes a similar point in his 1995 *Archive Fever*. In analyzing the physical archive established via typography, Derrida hints at the same changes Ong identifies by including such devices as telephonic credit cards, portable tape recorders, computers, and E-mail as technologies that contribute to the modern archive (16). Indeed, this archival aspect of secondary orality is made manifest in the transformation of the public library via computers and electronic

databases and catalogs.

Derrida once more demonstrates the simultaneous involvement of past and present in secondary orality through his criticism of the Western philosophic tradition. On the one hand, his commentary on the book as medium and on binary oppositions is a questioning of the rigid categories and hierarchies afforded by the linear system of writing. On the other hand, his critique of Western tradition relies upon the analytical methods derived from this tradition. Derrida readily admits this tension. In *Dissemination*, he struggles with the risk of “regressing into the system that has been” by utilizing old names in a work meant to be revolutionary; in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” he expresses the frustration of having to accept traditional concepts derived from a European ethnocentric perspective even as he denounces them (282). This tension is telling of secondary orality in one respect: the participant of secondary orality has the benefit of a far more extensive and accessible archive than the literate man could have dreamed of, even as he or she is drawn to the present moment via the electronic technology that makes this archive possible. As Johnson notes, “Derrida is, first and foremost, a *reader*” (x; emphasis in original). His methods of deconstruction are derived from current value systems—which change over time—but requires the analytical labor of sorting through the Western archive to demonstrate its flaws. It follows, therefore, that practitioners of Derridean deconstruction are participating in this complex weaving of homeostatic and archival thinking. This shall be discussed further in the following chapter.

### **Application: The Neo-Sophistic Mind**

This exploration of secondary orality is not exhaustive. As previously stated, secondary orality is not a global phenomenon, and the media discussed here are limited to

the twentieth century for reasons of manageability. However, a key contribution from this analysis is the uncovering of the hybrid nature of secondary orality as a semi-literate and semi-oral media context. This point reveals that even as secondary orality is a unique media context with the advent of electric circuitry, it has merged familiar traits of previous media contexts and cannot be said to be completely new. The following chapter discusses how this media context manifests itself in the academic world through an exploration of neo-sophistic rhetoric that shortly succeeds Ong's *Orality and Literacy*. This process entails following the five traits identified here (reliant on literacy; systematically spontaneous; aggregative for concision and efficiency; participatory and intimate yet distant; and homeostatic and archival) as guides to understanding the rhetorical techniques of the neo-sophists. In so doing, it is the purpose of this analysis to illustrate the influence of media in modern academia.

## **V. SECONDARY ORALITY MADE MANIFEST: THE NEO-SOPHIST AS READER RATHER THAN WRITER**

### **Methods to Identifying the Neo-Sophists**

The following analysis entails applying Ong's theory of secondary orality as represented in the previous chapter to the rhetorical techniques of the neo-sophists in the twentieth century. Due to the limited breadth of this inquiry, this chapter exclusively examines the work of Jarratt, Neel, and Crowley. Each of these scholars are identified among the "neo-sophists" discussed in Bruce McComiskey's 1992 essay, "Neo-Sophistic Rhetorical Theory." But they have also been selected for this inquiry based on some key commonalities: a conscious rejection of Platonic idealism as an authority in rhetorical studies; a personal identification with the ancient sophists themselves; an emphasis of democratic pedagogies; and a critical examination of the historiography surrounding Plato and the sophists.

The term "neo-sophist" is adopted from McComiskey's essay, which discusses the various approaches scholars have made to rehabilitating the sophists. McComiskey treats all epistemic rhetorics similar to those of the ancient sophists in contemporary theory as neo-sophistic. Under this criterion, he designates several contemporary scholars as modern neo-sophists, including Crowley, Neel, Jarratt, John Poulakos, Roger Moss, and Michael Leff (19). However, the majority of his explanation of neo-sophistry is committed to discussing Jarratt, Neel, and Crowley, who share a common belief that the relativism and democratic ideology that characterized the ancient sophists may also inform contemporary composition theory (17-18). This common perspective that joins these three scholars also separates them from the others McComiskey identifies. For this reason, the term "neo-sophist" or "neo-sophistic" in this inquiry refers only to these three



scholars to distinguish them from the others.

Jarratt's book *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* is the first of two primary texts in this analysis. She promotes sophistic studies through a systematic historiographic critique of how the sophists have been negatively represented in Western history, arguing that Platonic and Aristotelian thinking have dominated historical interpretation (3). While she makes occasional references to Protagoras and Gorgias, her work is mostly concerned with applying sophistic rhetorical methods to contemporary issues using feminist theories. Neel's book, *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, is the second primary source. Unlike Jarratt's general critique of Western historiography, Neel focuses an attack on Plato through a Derridean deconstruction of the *Phaedrus*. In so doing, Neel identifies his book as "pure sophistry" purported to liberating rhetoric from Plato's "tyranny" of philosophical criticism (6). Crowley's article, "A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry," is a supplementary source for this chapter due to its limited depth. Yet her article pertains significance as one of the earliest promotions of sophistry (Jarratt, *Rereading*, 8).

### **Concerning Poulakos**

Poulakos has been excluded from this analysis despite his high standing in rhetoric and composition studies. Certainly, there are important reasons for including his work. First, Poulakos's essay "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric" is perhaps the earliest scholarly text to promote sophistic studies in rhetoric and composition—published in 1983, one year after Ong released *Orality and Literacy*—and the essay, according to Google Scholar, has been cited in 283 sources, including Jarratt's book. In addition, Poulakos shares Jarratt's opinion that the traditional philosophic approach to rhetoric derived from Plato and Aristotle has limited the scope of rhetorical studies (35).

However, Poulakos's work bears important distinctions from that of Jarratt, Neel, and Crowley in terms of his purpose and ideology.

In his 1995 book *Sophistic Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Poulakos writes that though he is sympathetic to the sophists, he is "not interested in rehabilitating them" (2). This point is a stark contrast to Jarratt's and Neel's mutual purpose to appropriate sophistic methods into modern theory and contemporary issues. In his own article on sophistry, Poulakos does argue that sophistic studies will broaden the epistemological scope of rhetorical studies (35-36). However, he is less concerned with drawing upon sophistry for addressing social and political issues as are the neo-sophists selected for this chapter. In one review of Jarratt's book, in fact, Poulakos criticizes her for attempting to relate the sophists to contemporary issues in composition studies: "The insertion of the sophists in so many contemporary preoccupations borders on a denial of their 'otherness.' . . . Why not [instead] write a book on contemporary historiography, or postmodern feminism, or today's debates about college composition?" (66). Based on these differing approaches to sophistic scholarship, it seems Poulakos's manifests the disinterested scholarship of literacy more than the participatory behavior that characterizes primary and secondary orality. This difference is implied in Jarratt's response to his critique, where she complains of his style: "From John Poulakos's work I have learned the lessons of careful historical scholarship and a style of high seriousness. I look in vain for the playfulness" (68).

But this is not the only significant difference between Poulakos and the neo-sophists. He also does not cite Derrida in his work. This absence separates Poulakos from the chain previously established connecting the neo-sophists to Derrida and Plato. In addition, it creates an ideological distinction between him and the neo-sophists. As a

result, there is more interaction among these neo-sophists than there is between any one of them and Poulakos. Even though Jarratt cites Poulakos in her book, she does not mention him in her preface, but she acknowledges Neel among her editors and Crowley among her scholarly correspondents (xii). Neel, meanwhile, does not cite Poulakos at all but accredits Crowley with the idea for his final chapter (xiii). Therefore, although Poulakos's work is cited here as a contrasting view, he is not a subject of interest to this analysis.

This investigation is broken up into two sections discussing commonalities among Jarratt, Neel, and Crowley: first, their rejection of the Platonic ideal as guide to rhetorical studies; second, their personal identification with the sophists. Each of these sections includes discussion of the neo-sophistic criticism of traditional Western historiography and examinations of their rhetoric through the lens of secondary orality articulated in the previous chapter.

### **Rejection of Platonic Idealism**

The following section explores the neo-sophistic reasoning for rejecting Platonic idealism as the foundation of rhetorical studies. For purposes of simplicity, "Platonic idealism" is not an exhaustive term in this inquiry encompassing the complexities of Plato's theory of Forms. Rather, it specifically concerns two key assumptions related to rhetorical studies as articulated in the *Phaedrus*: first, that absolute truth is attainable through the art of philosophy; second, that philosophy precedes rhetoric, so nobody should practice persuasion without first knowing the truth (Plato 47). These are the assumptions the neo-sophists reject. This section explores the main grounds for this rejection, which consist of a skepticism of the practicality and legitimacy of Platonic absolutism and a determination to liberate rhetoric from the influence of philosophy. This

section explores these grounds specifically as manifestations of the systematic spontaneity, participation, and homeostatic/archival epistemology that characterizes secondary orality.

Jarratt expresses skepticism of absolutism via her critique of Western historiography. She argues that Platonic idealism does not account for the variety of situations the rhetorician may encounter in the present moment. Citing Protagoras's postulation that current issues require temporal, pragmatic solutions, she asserts that the "only permanent reality is the historical process through which social structures and the values that undergird them are developed" (10). Jarratt contends that no abstract value system as Plato advocated is able to transcend the multiple value systems that shape societies. Crowley agrees with this critique of Platonic abstractions, stating that universal values "cannot be known with certainty" on account of the multiplicity of views within the global village (328). By this reasoning, the process of writing and interpreting history is Jarratt's method of creating meaning, for this process of rereading and comparing history to current problems allows the rhetorician to work out solutions to the immediate situation. This, she argues, was the approach of the sophists, who "believed and taught notions of 'truth' had to be adjusted to fit the ways of a particular audience" (xv). As such, Jarratt argues the current social situation dictates the rhetorical solution and that the sophistic view of the historical process offers precedent for this view.

Jarratt's critique of Western historiography resembles the secondarily oral hybrid of homeostatic and archival epistemologies. This is evident in two respects: the first concerns Jarratt's choice of authorities for her rhetorical model; the second concerns her means to distributing her ideas in academia. By asserting the historical process is the "only permanent reality," Jarratt appeals to the homeostatic attitude that characterizes

primarily oral cultures. Where some rhetorical methods are perceived as irrelevant or impractical to the current situation—as Jarratt argues regarding Platonism—such methods will be eliminated. This is comparable to the sophists’ rejection of the pre-socratic natural philosophies on account of the pre-socratic skepticism of the senses. It also speaks to the homeostasis produced from radio and television’s emphasis of the present moment. Electronic media have the capacity to inform instantaneously regarding immediate situations and compel listeners and viewers to remain in the present moment. Likewise, Jarratt’s argument for a flexible historiography based on the immediate situation is an attempt to compel her readers to focus on the present moment.

On the other hand, Jarratt supports her assertion via citing Protagoras as a historical precedent for this epistemology. By citing the sophists as epistemological authorities, Jarratt is appealing to the literate expectation for precedent from the scholarly archive. Although Poulakos criticizes Jarratt for associating the sophists with contemporary social issues, her citing the sophists is part of a hybrid method of argumentation. If the culture of her time assumed a homeostatic perspective, this citation would not be necessary. However, Jarratt is writing in a transitory period where expectations of a literate culture still persist in a culture moving further into secondary orality. It is for this reason that her argument integrates both the homeostatic and archival epistemology. Being derived from a literate culture, secondary orality still draws upon precedent from the archive and current situation alike to establish credibility.

There is also the issue of Jarratt’s use of writing to make her case against Platonism. She is reliant on literacy in order to make her case for sophistry because writing is the medium of scholarship in a literate society. But her assertion that the present moment in history overrides previous historical interpretations makes her choice

of medium problematic in a literate culture. The notion that the present moment dictates the rhetorical solution is homeostatic, yet utilizing and citing a book as authority is archival. Even as Jarratt is advocating shaping history according to the present, her text becomes part of the archive—being nearly thirty years in print today—for future scholars to refer to as a precedent for this flexible approach to historiography. In other words, in writing a book, Jarratt is participating in literate culture but the epistemology she argues for is more characteristic of oral culture. This is comparable to the multi-faceted character of electronic media, for even though users are captivated in the present by tuning into a program, that program is archived and available for replay on tape. Therefore, unlike in a primarily oral culture, a secondarily oral culture has the capacity to preserve the past even while emphasizing the present. This aspect of secondary orality becomes more evident in Jarratt's reasoning for liberating rhetorical studies from Platonic idealism.

Jarratt's case against Platonism is largely directed against the constraints absolutism imposes upon rhetorical studies. In the first place, she writes in her preface that the legacies of Plato and Aristotle were instrumental in labeling the sophists as “arch-deceptors, enemies of Truth, manipulators of language” (xi). Moreover, though, she argues this portrayal of the sophists carried over in the form of judging rhetoric as second to philosophy. Jarratt refers to Platonic idealism as a “shadow” cast on rhetorical studies and Aristotelian logic as a “frozen perfection,” both of which stifle rhetoric by filtering ideas through philosophy (3). Thus, by rejecting the Platonic approach, rhetoric is liberated from philosophic scrutiny to reexamine and revise Western history, implicitly allowing for acceptance of a greater variety of ideas. She articulates this possibility in her link to sophistic studies as an alternative: “[The sophists may] serve today as a point of reference for the formation of a comprehensive historical practice unfettered by strict

disciplinary boundaries, a practice of history neither exclusively ‘intellectual’ nor ‘social’ nor even strictly ‘factual’ in differentiation from the fictional” (13). The determination that discourse should be free from “strict disciplinary boundaries” and from distinctions between fact and fiction is in direct contradiction to Plato’s assertion that the rhetorician should know the truth before practicing persuasion. Jarratt’s point, however, is not a total disregard for facts, but it is based on her previous supposition that no value system can account for all social contexts involved in rhetorical situations. Jarratt cites the sophistic revision of Greek *mythos* as an example of this historical revisionism, even going as far to portray Protagoras’s and Gorgias’s interpretations as positive examples for modern feminist theories, a point to be discussed shortly.

Jarratt’s model of historical revisionism is demonstrative of systematic spontaneity. The notion that the historical process is the only permanent reality indicates that reality, by Jarratt’s terms, is constantly shifting, making her use of the word “permanent” ironic. This is her point, of course. She is arguing the spontaneity and flexibility involved in history writing is the reason it is more fitting to addressing current issues than delineating abstract value systems through philosophical inquiry. Yet her argument is based on systematic analysis of historical readings of the sophists. Her entire first chapter is based on the premise the sophists have been misrepresented due to the influence of Platonic idealism. As a result, Jarratt practices the removed process of analyzing Western historiography in order to become involved in historical revisionism. And because historical revisionism implies an ever-changing history, there can only be spontaneity based on the inclinations and situation of the rhetorician revising the history. In this way, Jarratt reenacts the performative character of the radio and television broadcaster. To listeners and viewers, these broadcasters appear to be making their

presentation spontaneously when in fact they have prepared their program beforehand. Jarratt presents a similar performance, for while her argument is for a more spontaneous discourse, her text demonstrates this case is premeditated and not wholly spontaneous. It in fact illustrates the paradoxical relationship between systematic analysis and spontaneity in secondary orality. In addition, however, Jarratt's performative style is also reflective of the participatory nature of secondary orality. The following reading of Neel reveals a similar personal tone.

Neel's skepticism is similar to Jarratt's in that he argues that Platonism is as much a product of history writing as sophistic rhetoric is. This claim from Neel stems from his assumption that truth is unattainable, which leaves only rhetoric as the guiding force in historical progress. As such, he readily admits his own argument is sophistry. This being the case, Neel argues Platonic idealism is a farce. Its success in the West is more indicative of Plato's compelling rhetoric than of the enduring veracity of his claims. Neel argues that Plato's criticism of writing is a power struggle, a ploy to "negate the system itself, leaving himself with both the voice of authority and absolute control" (6). This assertion is a commentary on Plato's ordinariness as a rhetorician. Where Neel acknowledges Plato's skills as a writer, he also admonishes, "[L]et's not forget that he was just one more writer among many" (66). In this respect, Neel is drawing attention to Plato as a participant among multiple rhetoricians at one time. The only difference between Platonic rhetoric and sophistry, according to Neel, is that Plato claims to know the "truth." For this reason, Neel distinguishes Platonic rhetoric as a sort of *psophistry*, a term signifying rhetoric no different from sophistry besides the rhetorician's presumed knowledge of the truth (81). His case for sophistry, as such, is that it is more legitimate than *psophistry*, for where truth is unattainable, it is better to acknowledge this rather than



claim to know the truth (99). Crowley seems in agreement with Neel's perspective, for she argues that sophistry is a fitting method in composition pedagogy because "no teaching is done in a social and political vacuum" (332). In the same way, Neel argues that Plato is just one of many teachers operating from his own social and political biases. By these terms, Platonic idealism is not merely impractical as Jarratt argues but it is also dishonest.

Neel's critique of Platonism is an example of the semi-participatory nature of secondary orality. This is largely due to Neel's emphasis of Plato's limits as a fellow human. His attack is personal and not abstract. His concern in deconstructing *Phaedrus* is more on Plato's motives than on the content of his message. This personal involvement on Neel's part manifests further in his style. He writes with vehemence, regularly drawing attention to Plato's emotions in such statements as, "We can feel the anger generated by his [Plato's] inability to make writing do what he wanted it to do" (57), and "[The *Phaedrus*] attempts to say the opposite of what its author knew to be true, and he hated it with all his heart" (78). These are common instances where Neel not only assumes the emotional state of the author but also involves his own readers through the use of "we." These may be Neel's projections of his own emotions onto Plato and his readers, but even if they are not, this involvement of emotion hardly resembles the objective distance that Ong attributes to literate culture. Neel draws the readers' attention to Plato's humanity as if relating to the philosopher's "inability" were more significant than evaluating his ideas. Moreover, in describing Plato as "just one more writer among many," Neel attempts to level the rhetorical playing field by demoting Plato to a fellow player. This too is participatory in that Neel, knowing he himself is "just one writer among many," has placed himself in the same playing field as Plato, attempting to take

him on as a fellow rhetorician.

Of course, Neel's text is not wholly participatory in the same way a primarily oral culture is because he is a writer, not a speaker. The audience becomes emotionally involved in a primarily oral cultures largely because the social setting enables this involvement. The speaker is always present with the audience and so is emotionally connected to his or her hearers. A secondarily oral culture does not have this level of presence via writing, radio, or television. All users of these media must imagine their audiences. Without his readers with him in the composing process, Neel is unable to *really* know if they can "feel the anger" Plato supposedly felt any more than he can know for certain what Plato felt and wanted. His attempt to involve his readers is more likely a manifestation of the participatory nature of the electronic culture around him—a culture he refers to once in his book (36). He is like the host on radio or television who attempts to relate to and draw out his audience without seeing any members. Thus, while Neel's style may bear the emotional qualities of conversation, his medium being typography creates distance between himself and his object of analysis (Plato) and audience alike.

Like Jarratt, Neel rejects Platonism not only due to its supposed illegitimacy but also on account of its constraints on rhetoric. In the participatory fashion described earlier, he regularly expresses this rejection in outlandish flourishes such as, it's "time to free writing from Plato's tyranny" (6) and "high time we dismiss his *Phaedrus* as a serious document" (78). He explains, however, that his attack on *Phaedrus* is not an effort to nullify philosophy as a field but a "struggle . . . to clear a space in which composition studies finally can be liberated from philosophy" (202). This perspective is not a way of saying "anything goes" in rhetorical studies. Rather, as Neel implies in this quote, rhetoric liberated from philosophy allows all speakers and writers to participate in

a communal struggle for persuasion; the discourse that succeeds in this struggle as being the most persuasive is what Neel calls “strong discourse” (209). This qualification aligns with Crowley’s contention that a sophistic rhetorical model allows flexibility for its “tolerance of contradiction” (327), for where all ideas are permitted in debate, progress may be made through competition for persuasion. For Neel, the criterion for “good” and “bad” rhetoric is not veracity as Plato argues but persuasiveness.

Similar to Jarratt’s discussion of historiography, Neel’s effort to set up a rhetorical theory based on struggle resembles Ong’s notion of systematic spontaneity. Whereas both Jarratt and Neel argue for a rhetorical model “liberated” from Platonic idealism, they make no suggestion of any philosophical substitute. Such a substitute would nullify the point of their arguments. But having no systematic philosophical lens to replace Platonism, the neo-sophists inevitably look to rhetoric as the process of discovering and deconstructing endless probabilities. There are no defined probabilities or solutions until rhetoric is already enacted. In so doing, the neo-sophists reverse the Platonic notion that truth precedes rhetoric; rather, rhetoric is the means to endlessly pursuing truth. This is the spontaneity involved in epistemic rhetoric. Yet Neel’s situation reflects the tension Derrida encounters in deconstructing Western philosophy by means derived from Western philosophy. He utilizes the analytical processes Plato himself practiced in order to deconstruct the *Phaedrus* and, thus, advocate for the spontaneity of a rhetoric-by-struggle. His book is the systematic case, composed and published in literate fashion; the spontaneity is the product, but only after readers accept and act upon his analysis. This is the tension electronic media produces, for it emphasizes the present moment by encouraging spontaneity among its users, but it requires systematic preparation to be properly executed.

Neel's case for liberating rhetoric is also homeostatic and archival. Even as Neel argues for "dismissing" Plato's *Phaedrus* on account of current philosophical skepticism, his text inevitably places the *Phaedrus* in the spotlight for all of his future readers, for his own book, like Jarratt's, becomes part of the archive. His text also operates from an archival mindset because in utilizing deconstruction on the *Phaedrus*, Neel is acting as a reader, a beneficiary to the archive made available through the Western literary tradition. Were there no archive upon which Platonic rhetoric rests, Neel's attack on *Phaedrus* would be unnecessary, just as Jarratt's citation of the sophists would be unnecessary in a purely homeostatic culture. One may say such a symbiotic relationship to the past is a common part of all human history as historical periods simply build upon one another. However, a remarkable aspect to Neel's situation is that even as his analysis draws upon literature from over 24 centuries before him, the rhetorical model he puts in its place is concerned only with the current situation of a given time, having no philosophical lens substituting Plato to project what future ideologies may arise. Neel's case is for total spontaneity—even if that spontaneity is planned, as indicated earlier—spontaneity via endless struggle for persuasion. This is the homeostatic quality of his argument. Like Derrida, he draws upon the past to dismantle it and reinstate the authority of the present.

### **Personal Identification with the Sophists**

This section explores instances where the neo-sophists personally identify with the sophists through current social and political issues. This topic marks an important distinction between Poulakos and the neo-sophists, for his critique of Jarratt's book stresses the "otherness" of the sophists for their unique position in ancient Greece. Jarratt identifies with the sophists by linking them to oppressed groups in current society, and all the neo-sophists argue a sophistic rhetorical model allows for a democratic process

against more authoritative methods. In these examples, the neo-sophists simplify the struggle for a sophistic rhetoric in terms of binary oppositions as illustrated in Derridean deconstruction. Poulakos's emphasis of complexity versus the neo-sophistic method of simplification is possibly reflective of the analytical/aggregative contrasting pair between literate and oral cultures. Therefore, this section explores first the neo-sophistic emphasis of binary oppositions as a possible practice of aggregative formulas.

Jarratt's identification with the sophists is distinct from Neel and Crowley's for her emphasis of feminist theory. Through this emphasis, Jarratt explores the sophists in terms of their mistreatment and misrepresentation by philosophers. She indicates her identification with the sophists is more emotional than intellectual in her preface: "I was drawn to the sophists by the vituperation poured on them by their successors. Thus, my first relation to the sophists was as rediscoverer and defender" (xii). Jarratt's opening to her study of the sophists reflects the participatory nature that radio and television encourage in contrast to the objective distance afforded by the printed word. Electronic media involve the listener or reader and encourage him or her to relate to the person speaking rather than analyze the content of the speech. Jarratt's attraction to the sophists reflects a similar perspective, for her empathetic tone communicates concern for the sophists' social position versus the content of their texts. She continues this empathetic tone in her first chapter: the sophists are "aliens, stranger-guests to Athens," (2) and "forgotten teachers" (14) whom Hegel "rescued" from obscurity by labeling them as the antithesis to the pre-socratics (3). It is Plato and Aristotle, however, who are responsible for putting the sophists in obscurity in the first place. Having established this relation to the sophists, Jarratt makes a more overt connection to feminism and binary oppositions in her third chapter.

Jarratt argues that whereas the sophists may not have been feminists in the contemporary sense, current feminists such as Moi, Spivak, and Cixous are practicing sophistic rhetoric (78). She makes this association based on the oppositions *philosophy/rhetoric* and *male/female*: “The congruence of logo- and phallocentrism places both sophistic rhetoric and woman at the negative pole against philosophy and man” (65). In drawing a connection to the sophists through binary oppositions, Jarratt is effectively placing the sophists in the category of marginalized groups with women. This setup is not without its critics. Poulakos argues Jarratt’s analysis is problematic because it implies oppression takes place “between groups, not within groups” (66), and Lynn Worsham writes that linking the sophists to women’s rhetorics “has the effect of eliminating complexity, difference, and specificity” (92). These critiques, however, may be reflective of a difference in orthodox argumentation on account of these scholars’ differing media contexts, for the difference between Jarratt’s simplification and her critics’ expectation for detail and nuance resembles the oral/literate contrasting pair of aggregation versus analysis.

Jarratt’s manner of simplifying this connection between sophists and women is consistent with her conviction that where truth is inaccessible, only probabilities remain. This premise calls for greater participation among rhetoricians because collaboration (or struggle, as Neel describes it) is the means to reaching consensus through persuasion. In her response to Poulakos, Jarratt comments that, operating from a Nietzschean epistemology, her discourse is “inevitably caught within the contradictions of its terms” (69). In such a scenario, Jarratt’s objective is not so much to make her case foolproof as it is to make her assertions clear. Thus, she utilizes the binary oppositions to efficiently lay out the probability she is proposing—that sophists and women share a marginalized

position in current society—and therefore invite others to participate in the struggle for persuasion. This procedure aligns with the secondarily oral method of aggregation for efficiency. Jarratt’s use of these formulaic oppositions are not for recitation aid and, as shown, are certainly not for accounting for details. Rather, they succinctly articulate her connection to the sophists.

Another example of aggregation in neo-sophistic rhetoric is their association of the sophists with democracy. Neel makes this connection when he argues a sophistic model places all rhetoricians on equal footing in endless competition (99). This interpretation poses an opposition between sophistic democracy and Platonic tyranny. Jarratt and Crowley play upon this opposition more openly in their texts. In her introduction, Jarratt argues the sophists offer an “enabling tool of democracy” (xxiv) and promote “progressive political vision” (29). This portrayal she contrasts with Plato and Aristotle’s as “detached aristocrats” (3). Crowley sets up a similar contrast in her analysis of Plato’s *Protagoras*. Referring to Protagoras’s assertion of universal political awareness, Crowley argues his view puts him “squarely on the side of democratic politics, and thus renders his thought unacceptable to the aristocrat Plato” (327). This statement expresses the same opposition Neel and Jarratt articulate. This opposition the neo-sophists describe is aggregative in two respects. First, it simplifies the conflict between the sophists and Plato as resulting from differing political ideologies. Second, this opposition entails unstated definitions and assumptions and, thus, relies on the reader’s participation to fill in the gaps where details are needed.

In the first sense, this formulaic opposition is a simplification of the sophistic and Platonic conflict to political opposition. In juxtaposing the “democratic sophist”—Crowley having labeled Protagoras as representing the sophists holistically—with the

“aristocrat Plato,” the neo-sophists commit less analytical attention to the differing philosophical premises that divided the sophists themselves. This is largely because the neo-sophists are concerned with rhetorical studies as a separate art from philosophy. But more significantly, this juxtaposition overshadows the differing politics among the sophists. Edward Schiappa writes that associating the sophists with democracy is “wishful thinking” in light of the fees they charged which only the upper-class could afford (9), and Poulakos points out that certain sophists such as Hippias operated from the doctrine of *physis*, or nature, which attracted members of the aristocratic class against democratic *nomos* (67). Both scholars make their observations as direct critiques to this sophist/Plato juxtaposition the neo-sophists promote.

The purpose of this formulaic juxtaposition of the democratic sophist and aristocratic Plato is likely not an attempted defiance of historical reality, for it seems the neo-sophists are not insensitive to the political distinctions among the sophists. Jarratt, Crowley, and Neel confine their discussion of sophistry largely to the teachings of Protagoras and Gorgias, though Jarratt makes occasional references to Hippias and Prodicus in her first chapter. As such, one might argue the neo-sophists cherry-pick among the sophists to fit their epistemological preferences. However, there are other factors to consider in explaining their limited scope. The neo-sophists collectively frame their case for sophistry in direct opposition to Platonic idealism, and they practice this opposition via Derridean deconstruction. As such, their selection of the sophists is inevitably limited to those which are relevant to these two authors. Plato’s work regularly features the sophists in his dialogues, but his *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* are particularly famous for clearly articulating his opposition to these sophists’ epistemologies. As stated earlier, Derrida names the sophists as Plato’s “closest other” (*Dissemination* 108). Thus,



it may be that choosing Protagoras and Gorgias as representatives of “the sophists” holistically is merely an extension of Plato and Derrida’s work. From this standpoint, one may reasonably argue the neo-sophists’ use of rigid aggregation separating the sophist from Plato is a means for clearly separating themselves in opposition to Plato.

Other aggregative aspects to this juxtaposition are the unstated assumptions and definitions. All the neo-sophists apparently assume “democracy” is a good thing in rhetorical studies. Writing in the (currently) democratic West, their texts seldom offer nuance to their promotion of egalitarian participation. There are some instances where the neo-sophists suggest rhetoric should be controlled. Neel does add the qualification that strong discourse is a means to checking weak discourse through its superior persuasive power (209), and Jarratt and Crowley mutually advocate for teacher political participation as a way to guide class discussion (Jarratt 114; Crowley 332). However, these qualifications to a “democratic” model of rhetoric appear in the conclusions of their respective works. In regularly using the term “democratic” in the early parts of their work, the neo-sophists rely on their audience to participate, particularly by filtering such terms as “democracy,” “aristocracy,” or “oligarchy,” through current Western political biases. As such, this juxtaposition of the sophists and Plato is evidently not intended for recitation aid as in a primarily oral culture but is a means to simplifying complex ideas to elicit the participation of the audience. This approach is reflective of McLuhan’s point that such aggregation requires total participation of its audiences. It is a way of efficiently communicating the author’s point, similar to how radio and television broadcasters utilize succinct phrases and aphorisms in order to communicate efficiently in the short timeframes available for each daily program. Whereas their critics indicate the neo-sophists have neglected historical details, the neo-sophists’ methods are consistent with

the behaviors of a secondarily oral culture.

## **Conclusion**

This exploration of the neo-sophists reveals multiple examples of the traits identified with secondary orality. However, as Ong's theory is only recently applied to supposedly post-literate society, these findings may require revision in decades to come. This is particularly likely because Ong's theory also relies on retrospection, which only becomes possible with passing time. These limitations notwithstanding, the findings of this analysis suggest an epistemological divide in rhetoric and composition studies in relation to the changing media context in the West. While critics of neo-sophistry seem to operate within the analytical framework of literate culture, it seems likely the resurgence of sophistic studies is a manifestation of the influence of the electronic age in academia. It should be noted here that although this analysis involves some philosophical commentary, including criticisms of the neo-sophists and of Plato, this inquiry is meant neither to advocate for nor oppose a particular philosophical position. This is a rhetorical inquiry, not a philosophical one. However, these findings do demonstrate to neo-sophists and their critics alike that media influence ought to be considered a factor to understanding current rhetorics and epistemologies. Time will tell.

## VI. SECONDARY ORALITY IN STAGES, THE PRE-DIGITAL AND THE SOCIO-DIGITAL: A THEOREM

### Media Shape the Academy

The first part to closing this inquiry entails examining the implications of secondary orality. The most important implication concerns the future of the university in an increasingly electronic world. Being composed in a removed, analytical manner, this inquiry into secondary orality is evidently a product of the linear methods of literate culture. In fact, the value of Ongism as a theoretical lens is its capacity to bring awareness of new media contexts to the less involved and less participatory world of literate culture. But as this inquiry has been typed on a digital screen, it also points to the powerful influence the electronic world exerts on the university.

The university is based in literate culture as evidenced by its roots in the Platonic philosophic tradition. The findings in this analysis, however, suggest that the participatory nature of the electronic world has become a reality in modern academia through the personal and spontaneous styles of the neo-sophists. Neo-sophistry has gained ground in academia since Poulakos published his essay in 1983. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg present a sympathetic portrayal of the sophists in their 2001 edition of *The Rhetorical Tradition* on account of “renewed interest in Sophism” (5), a point that pertains significance as *The Rhetorical Tradition* is a foundational text in rhetoric and composition studies. Nathan Crick also follows in the footsteps of Jarratt, Neel, and Crowley by reading the sophist as experimentalist in his 2010 essay “The Sophistical Attitude and the Invention of Rhetoric.” And the findings to this inquiry suggest this endured momentum of sophistry in rhetoric and composition is indicative not only of a departure from a philosophic tradition. It signifies a departure from an entire way of life

afforded by the printed word.

The scholarship of the literate world as represented by Plato is analytical, hierarchical, and linear. Meanwhile, as shown by Neel's model of rhetoric-by-struggle and Jarratt and Crowley's broad-stroke portrayals of the sophists and Plato, the scholarship of secondary orality is aggregative, egalitarian, and fluid. Judging from the methods of the neo-sophists, it seems the importance of precision has waned with the rise of more participatory and spontaneous discourse. It may be argued that the instantaneous communication afforded by electronic media has rendered this precision a lesser priority. Writers now appear on radio, television, and now online podcasts and livestreams where they are able to clarify issues discussed in their texts to an audience much larger than any seen in a primarily oral culture or in a pre-electronic literate culture. These public appearances and talks—which may take the form of speeches, open forums, personal interviews, or debates—become records in the electronic archive and so are always available for readers to reference for supplementary explanation of a text. As such, where scholars have supplementary means to clarifying their work, the analytical precision that characterizes traditional literate culture is not as vital. Instead, the scholarship of secondary orality is not so much precise as it is engaging, provoking, and personal, much like the oratory of primary orality. Thus, the analytical precision that Poulakos, Worsham, and Schiappa expect of the neo-sophists may well be on its way to becoming a secondary expectation to modern scholarship. The implication here, then, is that as orality has returned to Western academia, so too has sophistry.

Of course, this resurgence in sophistic studies does not signify a complete cycle back to the social and political context of ancient Greece. Secondary orality is distinct from primary orality; there is no complete return to the past. Nonetheless, the findings of

this inquiry demonstrate that electronic media have brought back traits resembling the older oral culture, and these are disorienting if treated within the confines of literate culture. This critique of literate culture is not to make the simplistic motion to bring electronics into the classroom (although paperless and online courses are common today). Rather, it is to bring awareness to the electronic consciousness that will continue to shape (perhaps transform) the university in decades to come. This is shown in the changes taking place in the twenty-first century electronic world, which manifests important differences from the secondary orality described here.

### **Social Media Signifying a New Stage in the Electronic Age**

The digital component to composing this inquiry also suggests that Ong's view of secondary orality is antiquated in some respects. Certainly, his observations that electronics have increased participation and spontaneity seem to be accurate when applied to the neo-sophists. However, this inquiry is limited to examining secondary orality within the twentieth century because Ong's reference to the telephone, radio, and television as the instigators is a dated observation. Ong and Derrida may have lived to see the advent of the internet as well as the computer—which Ong refers to briefly in *Orality and Literacy* (78-80) and is a subject of interest in Derrida's *Archive Fever*. Both men, however, passed away in 2004, just two years before Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook and the world of social media began. Had Ong lived longer, perhaps he would have revised his theory of secondary orality.

Due to the limits of this inquiry, it has yet to be clarified whether *secondary orality* is an appropriate term for the social media context of today. The traits of secondary orality discussed in Chapter IV suggest this media context is largely defined as a hybrid of literacy and orality afforded through electronics, similar to the sophist's

media context being a hybrid of orality and literacy. The world of social media, meanwhile, is a more complicated world that enhances some traits of secondary orality while countering others. This world of the twenty-first century is still a subject of interest in current rhetoric and composition studies but has yet to be studied in depth according to Ong's theories. This section proposes that where social media do indeed signify a continuation of secondary orality, they produce a second stage within secondary orality just as typography had produced a second stage within literacy.

In most respects, the digital world of social media resembles that of Ong's world of radio and television. The global village has expanded with the advent of platforms like Facebook—which boasts 2.5 billion users as of the conclusion of 2019 (*Statista*)—creating a more interconnected world, a virtual community. The emotional energy and easy access of social media afford more spontaneity; simultaneously, the presence of text in Twitter and Facebook posts allows users to pause and systematically formulate their thoughts across hours or days before responding to a post or comment. In addition, because social media webpages update to show the most recent posts and news from their users, they encourage the users' focus on the present moment, and yet all information on these platforms is stored online, maintaining an ever-growing archive. It may also be argued that the abbreviations and the pithy phrases of meme culture demonstrate the increasing prevalence of aggregation and aphorisms in the electronic world. In short, the world of social media manifests all the traits—even amplifies some of these traits—of secondary orality discussed in Chapter IV. However, there are some aspects to social media that complicate their presumed position as contributors to secondary orality.

In the first place, social media involves its users more than radio and television do. As stated in Chapter IV, radio and television produce a limited communal sense in

that they, like writing, allow only for one-way communication. However, the two-way communication provided through social media platforms enhances the participation that characterizes secondary orality. As it concerns television, this enhancement is particularly evident in platforms like FaceTime or Zoom. All users on these programs are playing the role of viewer and news anchor at the same time; they talk to the screen and the screen talks back. In addition, the role of the screen makes FaceTime and Zoom superior to the telephone in creating a more personal experience, for where the telephone allows for aural and one-on-one communication only, FaceTime and Zoom allow for group and face-to-face interaction. They have retrieved the public forum of primary orality in a way that the telephone cannot. It should be noted, therefore, that even as these social media enhance effects of early electronic media, they evidently bring back aspects of primary orality that these earlier media do not.

In the second place, social media also elevate reading and writing in electronic media. Although radio and television broadcasters may be reading from notes or teleprompters, listeners and viewers have little use for reading or writing once tuned into the program. Social media change this by enhancing the role of reading and writing for everyday users as well as public broadcasters. The prevalence of text as a primary medium (videos and photos notwithstanding) via phone texting, Facebook posts, and Tweets illustrates the tenaciousness of literacy in an increasingly electronic world. As stated in Chapter IV, the “end of literacy” that Derrida represents does not mean reading and writing have or will cease to exist. Rather, it signifies the end of the printed word’s position as the dominant medium. The electronic word, however, is now taking stronger roots in the world of social media. Through social media, reading and writing are more prevalent than they ever were before. From this perspective, it seems that, comparatively

speaking, radio and television have diminished the role of literacy for users whereas social media have revived it. If this is the case, it may be argued social media retrieves from the world of literacy and, thus, produces another media context of its own.

Admittedly, these observations are broad and speculative. There remains rich ground to cover in examining the variety of social media through an Ongian lens. However, these two distinctions from secondary orality as represented here have important implications for the findings of this inquiry. On the one hand, the commonalities between secondarily oral media and social media as well as the heightened communal sense social media offer suggest that social media signify a continuation of secondary orality rather than a unique media context. On the other hand, the importance of reading and writing for users on social media may complicate the term *orality* as a descriptor for the twenty-first century media context. This seeming paradox of social media both continuing and countering the effects of older electronic media may then suggest social media signify a unique media context succeeding secondary orality. This inquiry proposes a more nuanced explanation.

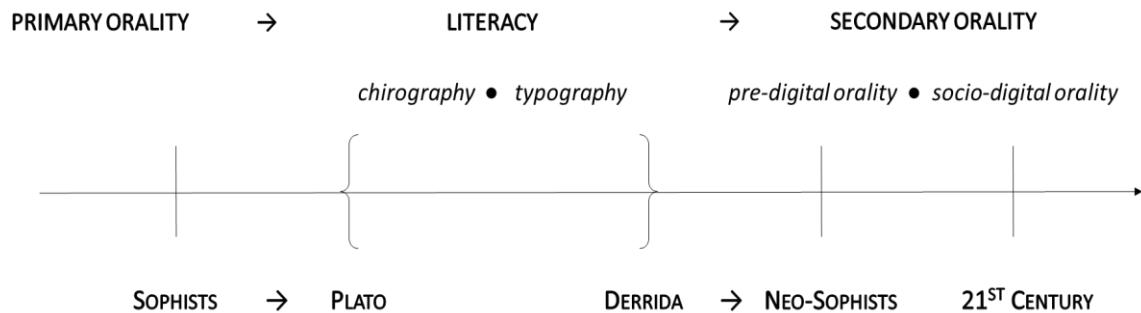
The point that retrieving writing complicates the label *orality* is likely based on an excessively literal interpretation of *orality* as it treats the human “voice as the major locus of orality,” a perspective Nayar argues against (223). Granted, the fact writing is a primary medium of communication on social media signifies a sort of departure from the experience of radio and television. However, this writing resembles speech in that it exists in platforms intended for rapid social interaction. Moreover, social media evidently amplify oral participation through interactive video and audio chats that radio and television do not have. And the fact social media produce the same effects Ong lists in relation to secondary orality disqualify them from signifying a new media context. In



most respects, social media are extensions of earlier electronic media and do not possess traits unique enough to break from radio and television in the same way radio and television break from print. Instead, as this inquiry concludes, radio and television signify merely the first stage *within* secondary orality, just as chirography is the first stage within literacy. This first stage has been titled *pre-digital orality* in **Figure 3**. The advent of social media, meanwhile, being similar and distinct to radio and television as typography is to chirography, signals a second stage.

The idea that secondary orality may be broken up into stages is evident not only because of the differences between the television world and the social media world but also because the media of pre-digital orality are growing increasingly unpopular. Radio programs and cable news increasingly give way to online podcasts and YouTube channels. Texting is preferable to phone calls. The media discussed in Chapter IV become more part of the past with each passing day. This view of pre-digital orality may seem to suggest it is a mere transitory period from literacy to the social media world, just as the sophists' time was a transitory period from orality to literacy. However, it is not that simple. The media that define pre-digital orality, though increasingly antiquated, are unique inventions that never previously existed. Social media evidently signify a clear departure from the structure of the late-twentieth century, for they democratize media participation on a scale the radio and television could never accommodate. Opinions and information from ordinary users now travel as rapidly as those of the news anchor on CNN. This reality is comparable to how the printing press democratized literacy by accelerating the circulation of writing. A possible area of study to explore in order to demonstrate this point may be to examine the twenty-first century news anchor as the medieval scribe who has been made inessential by technological advances. The fact radio

and television have these important differences from social media indicates secondary orality has advanced to a different stage.



**Figure 3 The current two stages of secondary orality**

**Figure 3** illustrates this view of secondary orality through revisions to the previous figures shown in this inquiry. Where secondary orality has originally been presented holistically, the observations articulated here suggest that electronic society has already evolved beyond the radio and television as a result of social media. Therefore, this inquiry proposes that while *secondary orality* remains a viable term for the electronic age, it should be examined in stages in order to account for the important differences between the late-twentieth century and the twenty-first century. As such, the stage of social media requires a title of its own to distinguish it from pre-digital orality, for social media are merely the instigators of this unique stage just as the television is an instigator and not a media context. This inquiry proposes the term *socio-digital orality* to signify this unique stage, first to preserve the focus on *digital* as the power source of these social media and also to address the heightened role of social interaction in this new stage. It should be acknowledged coining a new term requires a separate study into social media in order to test it. For this reason, this proposition has been made in anticipation of future Ongian studies of twenty-first century media.

## **Conclusion: The Value of Ongism**

This promotion for expanding Ongian studies is not to say there is no literature on the implications of social media in the twenty-first century. Lee Siegal explores the participatory nature of the internet in his 2008 *Against the Machine*; Paul Levinson discusses the features and implications of various social media in his 2012 edition of *New New Media*; and Siva Vaidhyanathan examines the detrimental effects of Facebook in his 2018 book *Antisocial Media*. While these texts offer significant contributions to understanding the implications of social media, they draw upon McLuhan rather than Ong as part of their analytical framework. Whereas McLuhan examines the effects of individual media, Ong offers a unique and broader approach due to his effort to break up history into separate media contexts. Therefore, even though these more recent texts offer useful insights into the effects of media, they do not have the overarching perspective Ong offers for framing current media advances within a continuous historical pattern.

Admittedly, Ong's approach may be more difficult today due to the rapid technological advancements in the current century. Indeed, it may be supposed that these advances render his theories as too dated for application. This inquiry contests this supposition. As stated previously, Ongism affords the literate participant the means to investigate and understand his or her media context via methods of precision that, while increasingly antiquated in the popular electronic culture, remain relevant in the world of scholarship. In addition, however, Ong's theory of secondary orality creates an awareness that the electronic age is a media context of its own that may be defined and understood as surely as primary orality and literacy may be. And understanding one's media context is a means to preserving agency as technology continues to advance. The reward is worth the task. As such, this inquiry acts as a bridge to better understanding the digital world.

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