

The Pitchman in Print: Oral Performance Art in Text and Context

by

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Oral performance art, patterned performative speech for an audience, is perhaps the oldest and most ubiquitous human art form. Specific instances of this art include the performances of griots and guslars, troubadors and shamans, as well as rappers and riddlers, preachers and politicians. While this art form is by definition oral, it is also the case that, frequently, literary art has represented oral performance art. There is written art which depicts oral art, which describes it, appropriates it, criticizes and co opts it.

In this dissertation, I define oral performance art as constituting a separate and unique artistic genre, one which has generic qualities. Oral performance art always, in all its specific instances and contexts, includes three main characteristics (1) a contested control of the performance and its reception, (2) a display of verbal virtuosity, and (3) a familiarity of form which links it to an established tradition.

I also define written representations of oral performance art as constituting a separate and unique literary genre, with its own generic qualities. This dissertation is founded on the conclusions of seven years of fieldwork with pitchmen and their audiences at contemporary American county fairs and carnivals. After detailing these conclusions, and examining the work of other theorists and critics of oral performance art, I present an analysis of the work of five literary artists Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and Simon Ortiz' poetry and short fiction.

Each of these literary artists, I argue, translates oral performance art, and therefore each of them is uniquely able to share and co opt some of the effects of the distinctive features of oral performance art. In addition, in these translations, there is an inherent emphasis on the differences between oral performance art and literary art. This emphasis allows these authors to uniquely engage audiences in their literary portrayals of other hierarchical differences which are associated with the oral and the literary, such as the difference between high and low culture, the elite and the popular, the modern and the primitive, truth and fiction.