

The Early History of Literature

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Abstract

Literature is any collection of written work, but it is also used more narrowly for writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose fiction, drama, and poetry. In recent centuries, the definition has expanded to include oral literature, much of which has been transcribed. Literature is a method of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and entertainment, and can also have a social, psychological, spiritual, or political role.

Keywords: art, various, memory, printed versions, subject.

Introduction

Literature, as an art form, can also include works in various non-fiction genres, such as biography, diaries, memoir, letters, and essays. Within its broad definition, literature includes non-fictional books, articles or other printed information on a particular subject.

Etymologically, the term derives from Latin *literatura/litteratura* "learning, a writing, grammar," originally "writing formed with letters," from *littera/littera* "letter". In spite of this, the term has also been applied to spoken or sung texts. Literature is often referred to synecdochically as "writing", especially creative writing, and poetically as "the craft of writing" (or simply "the craft"). Syd Field described his discipline, screenwriting, as "a craft that occasionally rises to the level of art."

Developments in print technology have allowed an ever-growing distribution and proliferation of written works, which now include electronic literature.

Definitions of literature have varied over time. In Western Europe, prior to the 18th century, literature denoted all books and writing. Literature can be seen as returning to older, more inclusive notions, so that cultural studies, for instance, include, in addition to canonical works, popular and minority genres. The word is also used in reference to non-written works: to "oral literature" and "the literature of preliterate culture".

A value judgment definition of literature considers it as consisting solely of high quality writing that forms part of the *belles-lettres* ("fine writing") tradition. An example of this is in the 1910–1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which classified literature as "the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing".

The use of the term "literature" here is a little problematic because of its origins in the Latin *littera*, "letter," essentially writing. Alternatives such as "oral forms" and "oral genres" have been suggested but the word literature is widely used.

Australian Aboriginal culture has thrived on oral traditions and oral histories passed down through tens of thousands of years. In a study published in February 2020, new evidence showed that both Budj Bim and Tower Hill volcanoes erupted between 34,000 and 40,000



years ago.^[14] Significantly, this is a "minimum age constraint for human presence in Victoria", and also could be interpreted as evidence for the oral histories of the Gunditjmara people, an Aboriginal Australian people of south-western Victoria, which tell of volcanic eruptions being some of the oldest oral traditions in existence.^[15] An axe found underneath volcanic ash in 1947 had already proven that humans inhabited the region before the eruption of Tower Hill.^[14]

Oral literature is an ancient human tradition found in "all corners of the world".^[16] Modern archaeology has been unveiling evidence of the human efforts to preserve and transmit arts and knowledge that depended completely or partially on an oral tradition, across various cultures: The Judeo-Christian Bible reveals its oral traditional roots; medieval European manuscripts are penned by performing scribes; geometric vases from archaic Greece mirror Homer's oral style. (...) Indeed, if these final decades of the millennium have taught us anything, it must be that oral tradition never was the other we accused it of being; it never was the primitive, preliminary technology of communication we thought it to be. Rather, if the whole truth is told, oral tradition stands out as the single most dominant communicative technology of our species as both a historical fact and, in many areas still, a contemporary reality.

The earliest poetry is believed to have been recited or sung, employed as a way of remembering history, genealogy, and law.

In Asia, the transmission of folklore, mythologies as well as scriptures in ancient India, in different Indian religions, was by oral tradition, preserved with precision with the help of elaborate mnemonic techniques.

The early Buddhist texts are also generally believed to be of oral tradition, with the first by comparing inconsistencies in the transmitted versions of literature from various oral societies such as the Greek, Serbia and other cultures, then noting that the Vedic literature is too consistent and vast to have been composed and transmitted orally across generations, without being written down. According to Goody, the Vedic texts likely involved both a written and oral tradition, calling it a "parallel products of a literate society".

All ancient Greek literature was to some degree oral in nature, and the earliest literature was completely so. Homer's epic poetry, states Michael Gagarin, was largely composed, performed and transmitted orally. As folklores and legends were performed in front of distant audiences, the singers would substitute the names in the stories with local characters or rulers to give the stories a local flavor and thus connect with the audience, but making the historicity embedded in the oral tradition as unreliable. The lack of surviving texts about the Greek and Roman religious traditions have led scholars to presume that these were ritualistic and transmitted as oral traditions, but some scholars disagree that the complex rituals in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations were an exclusive product of an oral tradition.

Writing systems are not known to have existed among Native North Americans before contact with Europeans. Oral storytelling traditions flourished in a context without the use of writing to record and preserve history, scientific knowledge, and social practice. While some stories were told for amusement and leisure, most functioned as practical lessons from tribal experience applied to immediate moral, social, psychological, and environmental issues.^[26] Stories fuse fictional, supernatural, or otherwise exaggerated characters and circumstances with real emotions and morals as a means of teaching. Plots often reflect real



life situations and may be aimed at particular people known by the story's audience. In this way, social pressure could be exerted without directly causing embarrassment or social exclusion. For example, rather than yelling, Inuit parents might deter their children from wandering too close to the water's edge by telling a story about a sea monster with a pouch for children within its reach

Ancient Egyptian literature, along with Sumerian literature, are considered the world's oldest literatures. The primary genres of the literature of ancient Egypt—didactic texts, hymns and prayers, and tales—were written almost entirely in verse;^[34] By the Old Kingdom (26th century BC to 22nd century BC), literary works included funerary texts, epistles and letters, hymns and poems, and commemorative autobiographical texts recounting the careers of prominent administrative officials. It was not until the early Middle Kingdom (21st century BC to 17th century BC) that a narrative Egyptian literature was created.

Many works of early periods, even in narrative form, had a covert moral or didactic purpose, such as the Sanskrit Panchatantra. 200 BC – 300 AD, based on older oral tradition. Drama and satire also developed as urban culture provided a larger public audience, and later readership, for literary production. Lyric poetry (as opposed to epic poetry) was often the speciality of courts and aristocratic circles, particularly in East Asia where songs were collected by the Chinese aristocracy as poems, the most notable being the Shijing or Book of Songs (1046–c.600 BC).

Egyptian hieroglyphs with cartouches for the name "Ramesses II", from the Luxor Temple, New Kingdom

In ancient China, early literature was primarily focused on philosophy, historiography, military science, agriculture, and poetry. China, the origin of modern paper making and woodblock printing, produced the world's first print cultures. Much of Chinese literature originates with the Hundred Schools of Thought period that occurred during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (769–269 BC). The most important of these include the Classics of Confucianism, of Daoism, of Mohism, of Legalism, as well as works of military science (e.g. Sun Tzu's The Art of War, c.5th century BC) and Chinese history (e.g. Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian, c.94 BC). Ancient Chinese literature had a heavy emphasis on historiography, with often very detailed court records. An exemplary piece of narrative history of ancient China was the Zuo Zhuan, which was compiled no later than 389 BC, and attributed to the blind 5th-century BC historian Zuo Qiuming.

In ancient India, literature originated from stories that were originally orally transmitted. Early genres included drama, fables, sutras and epic poetry. Sanskrit literature begins with the Vedas, dating back to 1500–1000 BC, and continues with the Sanskrit Epics of Iron Age India. The Vedas are among the oldest sacred texts. The Samhitas (vedic collections) date to roughly 1500–1000 BC, and the "circum-Vedic" texts, as well as the redaction of the Samhitas, date to c. 1000–500 BC, resulting in a Vedic period, spanning the mid-2nd to mid 1st millennium BC, or the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age. The period between approximately the 6th to 1st centuries BC saw the composition and redaction of the two most influential Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, with subsequent redaction progressing down to the 4th century AD. Other major literary works are Ramcharitmanas & Krishnacharitmanas.



The earliest known Greek writings are Mycenaean (c.1600–1100 BC), written in the Linear B syllabary on clay tablets. These documents contain prosaic records largely concerned with trade (lists, inventories, receipts, etc.); no real literature has been discovered. Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, the original decipherers of Linear B, state that literature almost certainly existed in Mycenaean Greece, but it was either not written down or, if it was, it was on parchment or wooden tablets, which did not survive the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces in the twelfth century BC. Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are central works of ancient Greek literature. It is generally accepted that the poems were composed at some point around the late eighth or early seventh century BC. Modern scholars consider these accounts legendary. Most researchers believe that the poems were originally transmitted orally. From antiquity until the present day, the influence of Homeric epic on Western civilization has been great, inspiring many of its most famous works of literature, music, art and film. The Homeric epics were the greatest influence on ancient Greek culture and education; to Plato, Homer was simply the one who "has taught Greece" – *ten Hellada pepaideuken*. Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.700 BC) and *Theogony* are some of the earliest, and most influential, of ancient Greek literature. Classical Greek genres included philosophy, poetry, historiography, comedies and dramas. Plato (428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) authored philosophical texts that are the foundation of Western philosophy, Sappho (c. 630 – c. 570 BC) and Pindar were influential lyric poets, and Herodotus (c. 484 – c. 425 BC) and Thucydides were early Greek historians. Although drama was popular in ancient Greece, of the hundreds of tragedies written and performed during the classical age, only a limited number of plays by three authors still exist: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The plays of Aristophanes (c. 446 – c. 386 BC) provide the only real examples of a genre of comic drama known as Old Comedy, the earliest form of Greek Comedy, and are in fact used to define the genre.

The Hebrew religious text, the Torah, is widely seen as a product of the Persian period (539–333 BC, probably 450–350 BC). This consensus echoes a traditional Jewish view which gives Ezra, the leader of the Jewish community on its return from Babylon, a pivotal role in its promulgation. This represents a major source of Christianity's Bible, which has had a major influence on Western literature.

The beginning of Roman literature dates to 240 BC, when a Roman audience saw a Latin version of a Greek play. Literature in Latin would flourish for the next six centuries, and includes essays, histories, poems, plays, and other writings.

The Qur'an (610 AD to 632 AD), the main holy book of Islam, had a significant influence on the Arab language, and marked the beginning of Islamic literature. Muslims believe it was transcribed in the Arabic dialect of the Quraysh, the tribe of Muhammad. As Islam spread, the Quran had the effect of unifying and standardizing Arabic.

Theological works in Latin were the dominant form of literature in Europe typically found in libraries during the Middle Ages. Western Vernacular literature includes the Poetic Edda and the sagas, or heroic epics, of Iceland, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and the German Song of Hildebrandt. A later form of medieval fiction was the romance, an adventurous and sometimes magical narrative with strong popular appeal.



Controversial, religious, political and instructional literature proliferated during the European Renaissance as a result of the Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1440, while the Medieval romance developed into the novel.

Literature

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