
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Assn., 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

The Antecedents of King's Message

To the Editor:

Recent news reports (e.g., *Time* 19 Nov. 1990: 99) suggest that "plagiarism" may have been more extensive in the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., than Keith D. Miller indicates ("Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," 105 [1990]: 70–82). Under the circumstances some further comments on Miller's fine article are in order.

First, while King's writings need to be understood in terms of oral tradition and rhetorical training, the conventions for attributions need to be understood in terms of their own history. While attributions can be readily found in Western philosophy as far back as Plato and Aristotle, the current practices in academic writing seem to derive from the Romantic valorization of originality and from the development of research universities in the latter nineteenth century, which further valorized originality. Copyright laws reinforced the notion that original expression and original thinking were the property of individuals. Perhaps *PMLA* should devote an issue to articles discussing the history of attitudes about "plagiarism" and about the conventions for attributions in academia over the last century or so and comparing these attitudes to earlier opinions in Western culture about using source material.

Second, aside from whatever influence oral tradition and rhetorical training may have had on King, he may have rebelled to a certain degree against the conventions for attributions in academic writing. After all, these conventions can seem pedantic to someone who is concerned about serious social injustices, especially when they are presented sanctimoniously.

Third, the influence of oral tradition in King's life deserves fuller attention than Miller gives it. While Miller cites two recent books by Walter J. Ong to make some points about oral tradition, he does not mention any of the earlier books in which Ong describes the training of orators in Western culture. (For a fuller discussion of Ong's earlier works, see my essay "An Overview of Walter Ong's Work," in *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, ed. Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup, Newbury Park: Sage, 1991, esp. 26–36.)

In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958; paperback, 1983), *The Presence of the Word* (1967; paperback, 1981), and *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (1971), Ong discusses how orators committed stock ideas to memory so that for the rest of their lives they would have raw material for

speaking and writing (to be used usually without attributions). Memorability and eloquence were prized far more in the rhetorical tradition than originality of thought was. Rhetorical education in the West aimed to produce not only poets but also orators dedicated to expressing “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed,” as Alexander Pope puts it.

Miller demonstrates that King repeatedly drew from a stock of ideas in his speaking and writing. And Miller has not suggested that King carried note cards around with those sources quoted on them.

Clearly King embodied the training of the orator that dominated Western education for centuries, and just as clearly the training of preachers today in all religions has affinities with the training in that rhetorical tradition. In preaching, attributions can easily be overdone and distract from the flow of thought. It’s better to get the ideas across than to get bogged down in attributions.

Fourth, the discrepancy between King’s claims about his sources and the evidence Miller produces about these sources calls for further comment. In the autobiographical writings cited by Miller, King claims that his ideas come from big-name sources, while Miller shows that the actual sources were a bit more humble than that. King already had his actual sources as part of his stock of ideas before he continued his formal education and encountered the big-name sources in question, and he used his stock of actual sources repeatedly throughout his life. Miller suggests that King mentions the big-name sources to impress his white audience.

But what if King felt that the big-name sources *confirmed* the stock of ideas he had already acquired?

On the one hand, such an experience of confirmation would explain why he repeated ideas from his stock, instead of using the language and ideas of the big names. With this confirmation, those ideas would have seemed worth repeating.

On the other hand, such an experience of confirmation could have encouraged the then little-known Baptist preacher to speak out as courageously as he did. It may not have been exactly the same as having a voice out of the sky say, “This is my son in whom I’m well pleased.” But it could have deeply encouraged King about the basic rightness of his convictions. Without corroboration of an extraordinary order, it is a little hard to imagine the young preacher taking such a brave stand.

Since Miller does not deny that King could have benefited from his understanding of those big-name sources, it seems at least plausible that King may have wished to acknowledge his debt to them for confirming the substance of the ideas he had already acquired and for thereby encouraging him to speak out.

Fifth, Miller’s discussion of sources and apparent “plagiarism” raises some fundamental questions about what exactly moves people to action. Does the belief that the speaker is giving voice to original thoughts motivate the audience? If so, how could a president ever hope to affect the public with speeches that others have written? Or how could a preacher in an established religious tradition hope to move the congregation? Or is it the charisma of the speaker that moves people to action? If it is, then originality of thought is not a significant issue. But what factors contribute to the development of such charisma? *Ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, as Aristotle suggests? Or the balancing of the rhetorical, social, role-playing self with the serious, central, sincere self, as Richard A. Lanham suggests? Or some other factors?

I hope that Miller continues to explore these matters, since the news media have decided to publicize King’s apparent “plagiarism.” *PMLA* deserves to be commended for having published such an important article.

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Reply:

Accustomed as I am to being attacked in letters columns, I appreciate Thomas J. Farrell’s kind remarks. I also value his observations, including his notion that, by reading certain books in graduate school, Martin Luther King, Jr., received reinforcement for some of his ideas.

Numerous authors did confirm some of King’s thoughts, but I suggest that the process of reinforcement was different from Farrell’s description of it.

By far the majority of King’s core ideas and values (such as his commitment to the social gospel) came originally from the black folk pulpit of his father and grandfather. These notions were essentially reinforced by Benjamin Mays, William Holmes Borders, and other formally educated black religious leaders who served as King’s mentors during his adolescence and early adulthood.

While King studied at his seminary and in his PhD program, he carefully investigated the sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Robert McCracken, and other prominent liberal white preachers. These sermons played an extremely important role in confirming and elaborating the social gospel and many other ideas that King originally received from his father and others in and around King’s boyhood church.

The mature King, raised with the traditional black