



ORAL TRADITION

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Oral Tradition seeks to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary focus for studies in oral literature and related fields by publishing research and scholarship on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression. As well as essays treating certifiably oral traditions, *OT* presents investigations of the relationships between oral and written traditions, as well as brief accounts of important fieldwork, a Symposium section (in which scholars may reply at some length to prior essays), review articles, occasional transcriptions and translations of oral texts, a digest of work in progress, and a regular column for notices of conferences and other matters of interest. In addition, occasional issues will include an ongoing annotated bibliography of relevant research and the annual Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lectures on Oral Tradition. *OT* welcomes contributions on all oral literatures, on all literatures directly influenced by oral traditions, and on non-literary oral traditions. Submissions must follow the list-of-reference format (style sheet available on request) and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return or for mailing of proofs; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. Authors should submit two copies of all manuscripts. Most contributions will be reviewed by at least one specialist reader and one member of the editorial board before a final decision is reached. Review essays, announcements, and contributions to the Symposium section will be evaluated by the editor in consultation with the board.

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Contents

<i>Editor's Column</i>	1
Walter J. Ong <i>Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the 'T'</i>	3
Bonnie D. Irwin <i>What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling</i>	27
Mark C. Amodio <i>Affective Criticism, Oral Poetics, and Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon</i>	54
Russell H. Kaschula <i>Mandela Comes Home: The Poets' Perspective</i>	91
Keyan Tomaselli and Maureen Eke <i>Perspectives on Orality in African Cinema</i>	111
F. Odun Balogun <i>Matigari: An African Novel as Oral Narrative Performance</i>	129
Jesse L. Byock <i>Narrating Saga Feud: Thátr and the Fundamental Oral Progression</i>	166
Timothy W. Boyd <i>A Poet on the Achaean Wall</i>	181
Steve Reece <i>The Three Circuits of the Suitors: A Ring Composition in Odyssey 17-22</i>	207
<i>About the Authors</i>	231

Editor's Column

With this issue *Oral Tradition* reaches a milestone: its tenth birthday. A decade ago quite a number of committed parties joined forces to bring the journal into being, at that point never imagining that anyone would be composing such a preface ten years and some 4000-odd pages later. There are so many people and institutions to thank that I despair of remembering even the most important, but on this unique occasion *OT* should make an effort to acknowledge—if not to catalogue in classic oral epic style—some of the parents, avuncular relations, and dependable friends without whom the inspiration for such a journal would never have jelled into an ongoing reality.

I think first of the University of Missouri-Columbia and of Deans Milton Glick and Theodore Tarkow, as well as Provost Gerald Brouder, who provided initial funding that partially subsidized *OT* over its first two years. With the creation of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, the university's commitment became a permanent one, with graduate student and faculty staff, part of whose responsibility it became to edit the journal. Dean Larry Clark deserves our gratitude for his continued and thoughtful support of the Center. The other stalwart in those early times, Slavica Publishers, also remains a full partner still today, and I am particularly grateful to its president, Professor Charles Gribble of Ohio State University, for his understanding, his creativity, and his savvy.

The editorial assistants for the journal have been its heart and soul, and we have recorded their names faithfully in every number of our publication. In addition to these noble colleagues, I want to acknowledge the essential contribution of the editorial board and the scores of other manuscript consultants, who responded to requests for their valuable opinions with, for the most part, alacrity and good will. We all wish that such generous participation could be tangibly rewarded; I hope the existence and function of *OT* is in some way such a reward.

Creating a forum would have served no purpose if no one had anything to say, but there has never been any danger of even a moment's silence in this venue. We receive many more manuscripts than we can publish, and have had to be highly selective over the years. But I am happy to report that this selectivity has not closed the door to younger scholars: assistant professors as well as eminent authorities are numbered among our authors in every issue, and graduate students have been contributors as well. This seems a healthy arrangement if the conversation is to be as broad-based and lively as possible, and we aim to continue to promote as diverse a symposium as we (all of us) can manage.

Along with diversity of authorship, we have strived to make the contents of the journal as various and inclusive as the multidisciplinary field it serves. Thus, along with occasional special issues on such topics as Arabic traditions and Hispanic balladry, *OT* has spent most of its allotment on miscellaneous issues—sometimes with clusters on this or that area—but always with the overall goal of presenting the richness of diversity. Perhaps that commitment goes back to the moment when the journal had to be assigned a title, and I hesitated over *Oral Tradition*, singular, versus *Oral Traditions*, plural. While the former

seemed a more effective scholarly moniker, it is in the spirit of the latter that we have tried to proceed.

With these things in mind, it is a pleasure to introduce the intriguing slate of essays that make up our tenth anniversary issue. It is absolutely fitting that Walter J. Ong, who has done so much for our collective enterprise, should begin the discussion with a fascinating treatment of hermeneutics as conditioned by voice, digitization, and other phenomena. Bonnie Irwin then deflects our critical gaze away from the narrative “center of things” to the frame that encloses and contextualizes that center, ranging over numerous traditions from East and West. Mark Amodio concentrates on the Old English *Beowulf*, but his essay has much larger implications for the kind of poetics we ascribe to oral traditions and oral-derived traditional texts across a wide spectrum.

Three contributions on Africa follow this opening triad. First, Russell Kaschula shows how the praise-poem tradition participated in chronicling and interpreting Nelson Mandela’s first visit to his home in Umtata after his release from prison. In a wholly different medium, Keyan Tomaselli and Maureen Eke demonstrate the effect of oral tradition on the making and understanding of film in South Africa. Yet another medium—this time the highly literary novel—is the subject of F. Odun Balogun’s essay on the Kenyan novel *Matigari*; this discussion should be of special value for those interested in Native American novels as well, since they wrestle with many of the same combinations of structures and signals Balogun uncovers in this syncretic African genre.

The issue closes with three additional articles, the first of them by Jesse Byock on the nature of Icelandic saga in social context and the fundamental role of the audience who served as “partner to the poet.” The final two essays, both on the Homeric poems, together help to complete a kind of ring-composition, a mnemonic and artistic design so typical of Homer (and some other oral epic narratives as well), in that they end this conversation in ancient Greece, just where one of its originators, Milman Parry, began it. Mustering ancient sources and modern comparisons from South Slavic oral epic, Timothy Boyd examines the compositional questions associated with the famous Achaean wall. Steve Reece then echoes the same pattern by demonstrating the ring-composition that underlies and informs the naming and killing of the suitors toward the end of the *Odyssey*.

All in all, it seems best to close this tenth anniversary column by looking forward to the next decade of *Oral Tradition*. Given the explosion of information and perspectives that the years since 1986 have witnessed, what remarkable advances—and welcome complications—await us as we move past the millennium? I urge all who are listening, and all those you can cause to listen, to let us know what you hear.

John Miles Foley, Editor

Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the “I”

Walter J. Ong, SJ

1. Interpretation: Verbal and Other

Although we tend unreflectively to think of interpretation as carried on in language and as applied to linguistic expression in oral utterance or in text, interpretation can in fact be much larger than language in human life.

In a quite ordinary and straightforward sense, to interpret means for a human being to bring out for another human being or for other human beings (or for himself or herself) what is concealed in a given manifestation, that is, what is concealed in a verbal statement or a given phenomenon or state of affairs providing information. We can interpret anything that provides information: not merely a verbal statement but also a sunset, a rumble in an automobile transmission, a gesture, a performance of instrumental music, a person's gait.

The terms “concealed,” “manifestation,” and “revealed,” just used, betray that we are thinking of knowledge here, as is common, by analogy basically with the sense of vision, rather than of hearing (voice-and-ear) or smell or taste or the manifold senses we group under “touch” (hot-cold, wet-dry, rough-smooth, soft-hard, resistant-yielding, and so on). Interpretation could be considered with regard to knowledge conceived by analogy with one or another of these other senses, too, but to do so would make a long, long story, and we can forego such considerations here.

As interpretation can apply to any sort of phenomenon, so it can be expressed in all sorts of human ways, not merely verbal but also nonverbal—for example, by raised eyebrows, a wave of the hand, a thumbs-down gesture, a knowing grin, or in non-gesticulatory ways, as by a grumble or by the clothes one wears or by a fireworks display. These nonverbal interpretations are always to some degree dependent on the culture in which the interpreters live, but some are also to some degree common to all human cultures. Thus, there are different kinds of smiles

and the meaning of a smile may vary widely (acceptable egalitarian relationship, brash insolence), but there is a general sense in which, cross-culturally, a smile is a smile, as against, for example, a frown.

Besides interpreting both the verbal and the nonverbal nonverbally, one can also interpret the verbal and the nonverbal verbally. Typically (although not in every instance) verbal interpretation as such has a certain edge over other kinds of interpretation in that it can operate with incomparably more complex implications than can other forms of interpretation, such as, for example, gestures, which can be exquisitely complex but can hardly produce the equivalent of Newton's *Principia mathematica*. A scientist working in a laboratory normally brings the results of the laboratory work to a conclusion, that is, interprets them—which is not to say with total explicitness—not in gestures or in a show of fireworks, but in an article or book.

If the work contains elaborate graphics to clarify matters in ways more economical than words, nevertheless at some point or points, directly or indirectly, the graphics must be explained verbally—although, once explained, they can work exquisitely and nonverbally, through visual attention to the verbally explained graphics.

Yet, although both verbal expression and nonverbal expression can be interpreted verbally, neither can ever be fully interpreted verbally, for any verbal interpretation must be given meaning also from the nonverbal in which the verbal is always embedded. This is why all texts, kept to themselves apart from nonverbal and nontextual context, always automatically deconstruct themselves. To hold together, even as texts, they need not only other texts but also the nontextual. Paolo Valesio (1986) has put this beautifully in the title of his brilliant book, *Ascoltare il silenzio* (*Listen to the Silence*), pay attention to what they are not saying but are simply taking for granted, and Stephen Tyler (1978) has made the point in another way in his book bearing the significant title, *The Said and the Unsaid*. Any given verbal interpretation receives its meaning in part from accompanying nonverbalized communication—shared traditions, common knowledge, shared sensory experience, here-and-now personal interactions, and much more—in which it is embedded.

To put it in another way, any *use* of words, oral, textual, or digitized, is not just words but is also a speech *act*, and as a specifiable speech *act*, is entangled in all sorts of other nonverbal matters—these persons speaking and these listeners listening, the physical setting, the mood (jocular,

half-serious, serious, uncompromising, for example), and much else. Text always relies, directly or indirectly, on more than the textual. To hold together, even as a text, it needs something more than text. Verbal interpretation as verbal is never complete. Total verbal explicitness is impossible. The definition (or interpretation) of interpretation just provided above itself calls for interpretation—which is not to say that we do not grasp it but that we do not grasp it simply through words.

Syntax or structure, which makes possible virtually unlimited complexity in relating various words/concepts, is what makes language, as has been known since Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) and as has been confirmed on sociobiological grounds by Bickerton (1990). Referentiality—the use of a particular sound or sign to “stand for” or “represent” some specific kind of thing other than itself—is not restricted to full human language, Bickerton has shown. (Even in common parlance, we do not say that a concept or a word “presents” something, but that it represents something—which was somehow present nonconceptually or nonverbally before it was *represented*.) Even without human coaching, referentiality is found in the “protolanguages” of species such as the vervet monkey, which in the wild has separate alarm calls to represent respectively the python, the martial eagle, and the leopard (12-15), each of which was present to an individual monkey before it was represented by its special referent call. But no trace of syntax or structure, including the simple and essential subject-predicate structure of language, has been found in such monkeys or in the much higher anthropoid apes (108; 13, 38-39, 97) even after these have been coached by humans. It is not referentiality but structure or syntax, including the cardinal subject-predicate structure, that is distinctive of language. Saussure had this right.

Language as such has always come into existence as sound (DeFrancis 1989, *passim*), and sound can be structured in illimitably intricate ways, as in a symphony. But nonverbal sound, even highly structured nonverbal sound, does not at all have the interpretive edge over other modes of expression that verbalized sound (and, later verbal text) has. For all its musicological and psychological resonance, Sibelius's *Finlandia* does not make Finland known in so circumstantial a way as does a history book about Finland, although it tells something about Finland that no words can express—once the hearer has been assured verbally that Finland is what the music is “about.”

But for all the edge that verbal interpretation has over other forms of interpreting, it is always joined with the nonverbal in one way or another. As has been noted, any *use* of speech, any speech act, oral or written, itself is never free of the nonverbal. We must be aware of the nonverbal setting as a whole in order to know what any given verbal expression says. “I’m going to get you” can be a serious threat, a not-so-serious threat, or a playful expression of any number of complex relationships, depending on the nonverbal setting in which the words are uttered—and, as the case may be, also on the antecedent verbal and/or nonverbal setting as well.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that verbal interpretation can never be purely verbal, interpretation, as has been seen, reaches a certain kind of peak insofar as it involves words. Studies in the ethnography of speech (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer 1989) or in the mass media of today (e.g., Downing et al. 1990) show how intricate the interaction between verbal utterance and nonverbal context can be. Although limited in a given instance by given exigencies, “context” as such for interpreting words can reach out indefinitely in space and in time, proximate or distant, which envelopes the present and which the present envelopes. Etymologies, for example, grounding the use of given words, can always be extended further. They can be historically bottomless, which is not at all to say inaccurate or uninformative. The information they supply is simply never total. There can be, and are, always further roots remaining to be accessed beneath those that etymology has bared.

A true anecdote can suggest how the nonverbal and the verbal can intermesh. At a meeting of the National Council on the Humanities some years ago, another member of the Council and a good friend, the distinguished director of a great municipal art gallery and thus a professional proponent of the visual, pulled me up on a remark I had made. I can no longer recall my remark but it must have been singularly nonilluminating. My friend countered with, “I would like to remind Walter Ong that, as has so often been said, one picture is worth a thousand words.” However stupid my own previous remark may have been, I could not let this remark of his get by. I came back, “If that is so, why do they keep *saying* it?” Why do they?

The reason of course is that, even in the case of a picture, verbal utterance can supply certain contexts and thus clarify elements that the graphic arts alone cannot clarify. A picture can be worth more than a thousand words if it is set in a cultural context that is adequately verbalized,

often enough not simply here and now but through memories or echoes of centuries-old discourse. A picture of a man with a sheep hoisted across his shoulders could mean a great many things. The centuries-old discourse about Jesus and the lost sheep fills it with specific and complex meaning, inviting limitless interpretation. But the verbalized context is itself defined in part extraverbally by its physical or historical setting, by cultural tradition, by gesture, and so on. In the instance just cited, the context of the story of the lost sheep includes a setting in a pastoral culture, where sheep are central to the human lifeworld, not in a hunting-and-gathering culture.

Besides being complex and supple, verbal interpretation is curiously self-propagating. For if, as has been seen, more than other sorts of interpretation (gesticular, and so on), verbalized interpretation moves toward maximized interpretation, it is at the same time never totally maximized, never totally completed and thus by its very existence invites further asymptotic movement toward completion.

In an asymptotic movement, the closer one gets to the objective, the more evident it becomes that the objective will never be reached. In a given situation, interlocutors can of course come to a satisfactory and true conclusion, not by reason of words alone, but because the meeting of their minds, mutual understanding, is realized not alone through the words spoken but also through the nonverbal existential context, such as the unconsciously shared cultural or personal memories out of which and in which the words are spoken. Plato notes that truth can be arrived at only after dialogue within long mutual acquaintanceship, "partnership in a common life" (*Seventh Letter* 341). Words alone will not do: the unsaid, in which words are embedded, must be shared in interpersonal relationship. Communication in words-and-context will yield truth here and now, will satisfy the demands of the present quest for truth even though the context and the words themselves are incomplete and could, of course, absolutely speaking, be subject to further verbalization and the grasp of truth thereby enlarged or deepened.

We can never understand anything to the limit. When we are communicating in words, verbalization can fruitfully stop where it does in a given situation not because there is nothing more that could be said, but because, given the present verbal-plus-nonverbal situation, the total existential relationship between interlocutors, each side senses that the other is at present satisfied, so that nothing more needs to be said, even though explanation could theoretically be prolonged indefinitely. A true and, for

the given situation, adequate stage of explanation has been reached. Silence ensues. But the silence can later generate more words (and more silence)—as it does in Valesio's book, *Ascoltare il silenzio*.

2. Stages of Interpretation or of Hermeneutic

In the past few decades, the Greek-based term *hermeneutics* or, alternatively, *hermeneutic*, with its cognates in French, German, and other languages, has attracted to itself discussion of the sort here carried on thus far with reference to the Latin-based term *interpretation*. Hermeneutics is indeed interpretation, but commonly refers to reflective or "scientific" interpretation. Reasons for the current fascination with hermeneutics will be touched on later. Meanwhile, the terms can be treated together here.

One can divide the stages of interpretation or hermeneutic historically and/or cross-culturally in various ways. The division here undertaken is one opened by recent studies in contrasts between oral, chirographic, typographic, and electronic cultures, under the following subheadings. This pattern of interpretation is not preemptive or exclusive. It is examined here simply for whatever it can contribute to overall understanding.

1. *Oral interpretation of oral utterance*. It should be noted what is meant, and indeed what is at stake, here. We are not concerned with "texts" as such at all. In dealing with what I have elsewhere styled primary oral culture, a culture which has no knowledge of any sort of writing or even of the possibility of writing (for various movements toward writing and the final achievement of full writing, see DeFrancis 1989), to speak (or write) of an "oral text" is an anachronism. In a primary oral culture, there can be no oral "text," however we may have been addicted until recent times to think unreflectively of oral utterance not by examining oral cultures' utterances as such but only by conceiving of them by analogy with texts, retrojecting our concept of an oral culture out of what is known of our own or others' textual cultures.

It is of course true that our study of primary oral cultures involves texts. For study purposes, although we can now sound-tape an oral performance, we commonly at some point make even the oral taped performance into texts, to which we can return, as we cannot to a live oral performance. And, of course, although the acoustic tape can recreate the sound, it cannot bring back the total existential situation in which the

performance initially lived: this total real situation that defines orality of course eludes recovery. Moreover, today's linear, scientific or quasi-scientific discourse about oral performance and oral culture, as about anything else, is dependent upon mental structures that have been made available by writing and which implement our thought processes (Ong 1982). Thus, in a deeply textualized culture study of oral performance will always bear some mark of the textualized mental habits of the investigators. But intelligence is reflective, can turn back on itself, so that, while we can never totally re-create a primary oral culture in our imagination or minds, we can approximately re-create it and be aware that our re-creation is defective in various ways (not all of which we are capable of specifying, although we may, in various inarticulate ways, register virtually all of them). Such knowledge about the limitations under which we labor is the next best thing to not having the limitations. And it is crucial.

We need to remember that, by a well warranted extrapolation from Gödel's proof, any sort of closed system is impossible. Neither oral language nor text nor electronic "artificial intelligence" can be a closed system. They are all interactive somewhere with something other than themselves. The foundation of computer science, for example, as Leith (1990) has shown, is sociological. (Why does one start the science with this rather than that question or set of questions?—No computer can respond to such a fundamental query, precisely because it a question arising antecedently to all computerization.) Unless one wishes to suppose that computers were there from the beginning of *Homo sapiens* some 150,000 years ago (Stringer 1990), as some want to postulate "text" was.

Deconstructionists and others seem surprised (and delighted—or both) to be able to show that texts and anything considered by analogy as a text, can be found never to have total internal consistency. But this is hardly surprising if one notes that texts are not purely "natural" products, such as exhaled breath or sweat or spittle, but are technologically constructed systems (writing is a technology, as also, *a fortiori*, is print). As systems, they cannot be self-contained. They are built by something outside them. Indeed, *ceteris paribus*, the same is true of oral utterance, which cannot be self-contained either, for it also cannot be developed into a self-contained system.

There is no evidence that either writing or the very possibility of writing entered human consciousness for nearly all of the approximately 150,000 years of the existence of *Homo sapiens*—or, to adopt the outer

limit of existence of *Homo sapiens*, for the possibly 500,000 years of the existence of the species (Stringer 1990). We can assume, not unrealistically (see DeFrancis 1989), that *Homo sapiens* could in some way speak from the beginning, that speech of some sort was what constituted or made *Homo sapiens* the dominant species that we became. Yet, although we have evidence of other artifacts running back tens or even hundreds of thousands of years, we have no evidence of writing before 5000 to 6000 years ago—a mere nothing in 150,000 to 500,000 years of existence. To treat verbal expression for 150,000 years or more as always a “text” in the total absence of any such thing as a manufactured text—seems stultifying, when we now know in massive and circumstantial detail what differentiates the mental and speech activities of oral cultures from the mental and speech activities of writing cultures.

We know enough about the prechirographic, purely oral stage that has constituted almost all of human existence to be able to say that in oral culture itself all interpretation was in a certain sense ad hoc, and essentially dialogic, an oral exchange about an oral utterance or oral utterances. Oral interpretation ultimately owed what stability it had not simply to other oral utterances but basically to the cultural institutions in which utterance was deeply embedded rather than to any extensively analytic explanation of anything such as textual cultures make possible (in their oral as well as in their textual performance). The meaning of any word was validated by no textual or other record, but simply by its actual use over time in given situations and/or with gestures and other nonverbal signifiers (Sienaert 1990). You knew what the word meant from the way you had heard it embedded in usage, that is, in nonverbal context, perhaps mingled with the verbal context of other words accompanying it. There were no definitions, no records of how the word had previously been used and there was no way to “look it up”—“look up” was an “empty” expression, totally meaningless and incomprehensible in purely oral culture. Nor was there any way to retrieve earlier oral uses of the word in their fuller verbal and nonverbal contexts. Each person assessed the meaning of each word by interpreting the context in which he or she encountered the word.

2. *Textual interpretation of oral utterance.* This refers to interpretation of oral performance as such carried out by cultures that have interiorized writing, made it their own, and cultures that use print. The psychodynamics of orality have been described in appreciable depth only beginning with the work of Marcel Jousse from 1924 on (see Sienaert 1990)

and with Milman Parry's more immediately eventful collected works published in 1971, and are still passed over by much text-bound scholarship. But we do have (as in Goody 1968, Foley 1990, and many other sources) manuscript and printed hermeneutic of verbal performances of oral peoples as such, which has, of course, required intensive fieldwork, entailing, among other things, transcription in the field. Such interpretation cannot be identical with the oral interpretation of oral speech in a primary oral culture, for it cannot rid itself entirely of the textual mindset with which it operates. But it can reflectively undercut its own textuality to an extent, undertaking to approximate the mindset of the oral cultures it is studying. The problem is no more than the most basic problem of all history: not so much the problem of reconstructing past conditions out of details we have accumulated about them, as that of forgetting what we know that those we are studying did not know.

3. *Chirographic (handwritten) interpretation of written text.* This exists in massive quantity from antiquity. It is handicapped by the fact that manuscript texts are inherently unstable by contrast with the printed texts that we are used to and take for granted. In copying previously corrected copies, scribes inevitably introduce new errors of their own. Print can correct texts piecemeal, leaving untouched the parts of the original that are not to be corrected.

4. *Printed interpretation of printed text.* Here the text dealt with in the verbal interpretation of the text can be to all intents and purposes stable. Yet interpretation here has been handicapped by limited awareness of the psychodynamics of oral utterance and of the effects of this psychodynamics on early writing, where a good deal of conspicuous "oral residue" (habits of mind fixed by many ages of oral performance) is detectable in printed texts well into the nineteenth century in the West (Ong 1967:22, e.g.).

By the mid-eighteenth century, after print has interiorized itself thoroughly in human consciousness (see Kernan 1987), so that the text, fixed in print to an extent unrealizable in manuscript, is felt as a physical thing apart from spoken words, interpretation becomes a self-conscious, semi-scientific, reflective activity, such as we commonly today take "hermeneutics," strictly so-called, to be (see below, "The Hermeneutic Explosion"). The hermeneutic age begins roughly with romanticism and the concomitant dissolution of the centuries-old age of rhetoric, which had originated as a reflectively conscious "art" in the highly oral culture of Greek antiquity and which often enforced highly oral styles even in written

and printed utterance.

5. *Electronically implemented hermeneutic of oral utterance.* This is managed usually by recording the oral utterance as sound, most often via sound tapes or, now, compact disks. But the taped oral utterance finds itself inexorably transmuted into inscribed, visualized text for more intensive study. Once in text, the oral utterance is read—which is to say, reconverted into living sound either vocally or in the imagination of the reader.

6. *Electronically implemented hermeneutic of written or printed or electronically produced text.* With electronics, and particularly the computer, hermeneutics has entered a more intensely reflective stage than ever before, as greater and greater stores of information can be dealt with by means of more and more potent technological aids to interpretation. The distance of interpretation from utterance is increased exponentially as more circumstantially accurate, particularized hermeneutic is spectacularly improved. Computerized data bases will now, for example, give every instance of the use of a given key word in a computerized book text running to thousands of pages or even provide today every instance of the occurrence, with a multi-word context, of a given individual's name in the *New York Times* of yesterday (this for all the world, via a data base located in Ohio).

Most notably, as Bolter has explained in exquisite detail in his *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, the computer produces an electronic text which is newly open and fluid, subject to constant supplementing and revision. Computerized hermeneutics operates in and on and out of this open, electronic text. Pictures and other graphics can become a part of the electronic text, a part of writing. But in the last analysis, the governing structure of such hermeneutics remains verbal, as Bolter's book itself shows. The book is available in print or on computer diskette. Yet in this new world of the open text, even on diskette, the verbal retains its primacy as explanation. Bolter uses illustrations and graphics, but these are embedded in a text which is overwhelmingly verbal, even when including and freshly interacting with visual presentation.

3. The Hermeneutic Explosion

Interpretation is thought of and practiced today more and more under the title of "hermeneutics." Although human beings have been interpreting

utterance from time immemorial, the development of hermeneutics, so labeled, has been a relatively recent phenomenon, following on the saturation of consciousness with print, which made verbalization into a fixed physical object as it never before had been felt to be. A text could now be operated upon as a stable physical object felt as somehow distinct from the living, moving thought and speech performing the hermeneutic operation. Instead of sounds, one had a visible object that, even more in mechanically rigidified print than in writing, could be felt as a fixed “thing” on which mobile, here-and-now moving verbal hermeneutic (oral, or more often textual) could operate. (One of the contributions of deconstruction and other recent literary theory and philosophy, has been to sound the alert that a text is not all that fixed a “thing.”) Hermeneutics refers to the resulting systematized or methodized interpretation, felt as different from the text on which it “operates” even if the hermeneutic emerges as itself a text. “Hermeneutics,” as against “interpretation,” suggests explicit reflection about the interpretive process itself. Hermeneutics is interpretation grown self-conscious.

Hermeneutics, or alternatively *hermeneutic*, is a relatively new term in English, as are its equivalents in other languages. The earliest citation of the English-language term in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1961, rpt. 1983) is from the year 1737, in the period when, some two centuries after its invention, print was taking definitive possession of human consciousness in the West, as Kernan (1987) has so well shown in his *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson*.

Hermeneutics as such at first addressed itself largely to biblical and other sacred texts, but it has now expanded far more widely. Specialized hermeneutics, more or less methodical interpretive operations and theories, have been developed for different sorts of text—literary or poetic, political, philosophical, scientific, and other. Elaborate, often deeply insightful ways of managing textual hermeneutics have been devised in recent times, notably by theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, and Jürgen Moltmann, by philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur, and by hosts of literary commentators, from the Formalists and the New Critics through the Deconstructionists. Hans-Georg Gadamer has produced a magisterial treatment of the subject in his *Truth and Method* (1983, original German 1960), which has itself been subject to further hermeneutic processing by Joel C. Weinsheimer in his *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A*

Reading of Truth and Method (1985). Weinsheimer explains or interprets what Gadamer was doing when he was explaining or interpreting what he was interpreting—which was often one or another interpretation worked out by earlier authors.

But the work of these practitioners and theorists is only the tip of the iceberg. In our present electronic era, the term *hermeneutics* has become a cross-disciplinary academic and intellectual buzzword. It encompasses far more than interpreting simply texts. Cruising through a university library catalogue, one finds endless listings of diverse *hermeneutics* under title and/or subject headings, largely from the 1970s on, such as “literary hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics and analysis,” “science, hermeneutics, and praxis,” “Buddhist hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics as method, philosophy, and critique,” “context and hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics, tradition, and reason,” “hermeneutics and deconstruction,” “hermeneutics and social science,” “hermeneutics as politics,” “hermeneutics of postmodernity,” “hermeneutics of ultimacy,” “hermeneutics versus science” (is hermeneutics opposed to science, allied with science or even constitutive of science, or simply used to explain science?), “religion, literature, and hermeneutics,” “feminist hermeneutics,” “philosophical hermeneutics” (is hermeneutics allied with philosophy, supplementary to philosophy, interwoven with philosophy, constitutive of philosophy?), “Yeats’s autobiography and hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics and the personal structure of language,” and so on and on. The alternative term *interpretation* is not uncommon, but its use in past or present shows nothing of the trendiness found in the use of the more reflectively intensive *hermeneutics* from the past few decades through the present. The textually targeted *hermeneutics*, born of the study of texts, is evidence of the hold of the text and its intellectual accessories on the mind today, which has set the stage and furnished the raw material for the New Criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction, and doubtless will set the stage for much else still in the offing.

In his impressively comprehensive study of hermeneutics and related subjects just mentioned, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer notes that formal study of what we now style hermeneutics was originally rooted in the study of texts and that “Schleiermacher was the first to see that the hermeneutical problem was not raised by written words alone, but that the oral utterance also presented—and perhaps in its fullest form—the problem of understanding” (353). The astounding fact that, according to Gadamer, no one before Schleiermacher appeared to be aware of the need of

hermeneutics for interpreting oral utterance is something to reflect on in relation to our recent textual fixation.

In fact, the Greek term *hermeneia* refers indifferently to interpretation or explanation of oral utterance or text or other phenomena. Interpretation or hermeneutic originated with oral utterance, but the relevance of interpretation or hermeneutic to oral utterance in our time grows anachronistically out of awareness of its relevance to texts. This anachronistic cast of thinking is symptomatic of the textual bias that still affects study of language and thought almost everywhere—and understandably so, for systematic, linearly developed, abstract, scientific or quasi-scientific study of any kind depends on writing. There is no oral treatise on orality, no oral “study” of orality, and there cannot be, for there can be no oral treatise on anything (Havelock 1968). All you can have—and this, indeed, is a lot—is oral interpretation of an always fluid sort, existentially meaningful (fitting into the immediate, living situation), but never “scientifically” controlled (that is, quasi-static).

The widespread and ultimately indispensable use of writing and its sequels, print and electronic text, ultimately established our present and longstanding textual bias, but it also enables us to correct our textual bias, at least to a degree, even though we seldom do so. In cultures so reliant as ours on writing and print and now electronics, text becomes all too readily the model for all utterance, and eventually for all of existence. All text, we must remember, is the creation not just of unaided human beings, as oral speech is, but of human beings plus technology, without which text is impossible. Relating Gadamer’s observations here to the four stages of verbal communication we have mentioned earlier—primary oral culture (no knowledge of writing or of its possibility), scribal or chirographic culture, print culture, and electronic culture—we can discern a profoundly significant sequential pattern. (1) In primary oral cultures, interpretation certainly took place in oral verbal exchange, paradigmatically in a dialogic setting. One of Plato’s objections to writing in the *Phaedrus* (275) is precisely that it cannot interpret itself if you ask it what it means, whereas oral utterance can normally be interpreted by its speaker. (2) With handwritten texts, interpretation becomes more urgent, precisely because there is no direct dialogic interaction—the writer and the reader or audience need not be and normally are not present to each other. Since verbalization always implies dialogue, the writer and reader have always to fictionalize one another into a dialogue setting (Ong 1975). (3) With the deep

interiorization of print in the mid-eighteenth century, when authors could for the first time make their living out of producing texts for sale (earlier, even after print was invented, books were not priced to include royalties, so that writers had to have a patron or some independent source of income—see Kernan 1987 for details), hermeneutics as a self-conscious, more or less systematized activity comes into its own. (4) With the development of electronic communication, today hermeneutics has of course become little short of an obsession. Electronic texts are the product of digitization, that is, of fractioning, of treating everything in terms of numerically distinct units, a radical act of separation contrasting with the unifying drive of hermeneutics. We see here that interpretation becomes more and more self-conscious as the originally spoken word is distanced more and more from the human lifeworld.

Why is it that hermeneutics has become such an obsession precisely in the era of the development of electronic communication? One reason that suggests itself is that electronic communication has made us into an information society, and information of itself says nothing unless it is interpreted or treated hermeneutically. DNA carries massive “information” that is cogent enough in itself operationally but that “says” nothing: to be put into words and thought patterns it has to be interpreted, or treated hermeneutically by the human mind.

But further, a deep subconscious or unconscious compensatory psychological development seems to be at work here. Computers and other electronic media work by fractioning. Information in a computer has to be reduced to binary numerical units, 0 and 1. For computerization is now virtually all digital: early analogue computers are mostly outmoded. Binary digitization, like all digitization, breaks everything apart, but into more and more infinitesimal pieces until the breaks are so tiny that they can in effect be disregarded.

Nevertheless, the breaks are there and always will be, as Leith, among others, has made clear. While hermeneutics can and does profit from use of digitization in computers, it also moves in the opposite direction, away from digital breakdown. Hermeneutics, interpretation, seeks ultimately not to divide but to integrate. Hermeneutics operates on the deep underlying principle that everything is related to everything else. By relating one thing to another, and, in intent if not in actual achievement, ultimately relating everything to everything else—for example, explaining the past by the present and the present by the past and otherwise utilizing

the “hermeneutic circle”—its implicit ambition is ultimately to connect all things in consciousnesses to one another in the unbroken web of history out of which all experience of anything and everything emerges—William James’s “big, blooming, buzzing confusion” that impacts the newborn infant. We can live with digitization (which is disguisedly but always radically incomplete, even when entirely adequate) because we have hermeneutics (though it also is always incomplete): the two are complete and incomplete in different and complementary ways.

Compared to one another, the present-day preoccupation with digitization, in the computer and elsewhere, and the present-day preoccupation with hermeneutics thus appear to be psychologically complementary. Both preoccupations are in evidence across the world in varying degrees, most notably in industrialized societies. It appears that we can live with digital fractioning (dehumanizing in itself) because we are involved so deeply in the humanizing effort of hermeneutics. Never have communications media been given to such detailed interpretation of their own meaning and impact, humanizing and dehumanizing, as in our digitizing society. One need only scour through the subject headings in a library catalogue for recent titles featuring “communication” and “communications” to see the state of affairs. Isocrates and Plato and Socrates and Aristotle are far from neglected today. We have more knowledge of them than ever. As a result their thought is digested and interwoven with and even smothered by ongoing interpretations of interpretations of interpretations of their work and that of others.

In sum, although digitization, as a fractioning enterprise, and hermeneutics, as a holistic or totalizing enterprise, are opposed to one another, they are also complementary. That is, digitization can serve hermeneutic. The vast net of textual hermeneutic with which the scholar is surrounded today could not have been woven and could not be maintained without the use of digitizing technology. And without hermeneutic, which tells us what digitization means and relates digitization to things outside itself, digitization is only gibberish. Hence the multifarious works interpreting computers and the specific characteristics and meanings of the texts they produce.

The highly reflective self-conscious rhetorical cultures of the West from classical antiquity through the nineteenth century cannot begin to match the self-conscious reflectiveness concerning communications that marks our present age, when thousands of new books on communications in

its verbal and multifarious other forms are published every year to serve the internet of communication departments and research centers, as well as innumerable individuals across the world.

4. All Utterance Is Interpretive or Hermeneutic

If we take interpretation (or self-conscious interpretation, which is styled hermeneutic) in a quite ordinary and straightforward sense, so that interpretation, as here indicated at the start, means for a human being to bring out for another or others (or for himself or herself) what is concealed in a given manifestation, it appears evident that all use of language is interpretive or hermeneutic. Interpretation or hermeneutic makes manifest something (perhaps highly controversial or ironic) that was not evident before the interpretation or hermeneutic was provided. And of course it also simultaneously conceals something. All explanation or hermeneutic warrants further explanation or hermeneutic, including this explanation or hermeneutic being provided here. Again, total verbal explicitness is impossible. As has been indicated earlier, hermeneutic or explanation stops not when there is nothing left to be explained but when, for present purposes, in this given existential situation, nothing further is felt to be necessary. Thus the papers being delivered at the meetings of learned societies stop when they do.

Awareness that all use of language is interpretative or hermeneutic connects with the awareness that truth can never be simply propositional, as the Ramist and Cartesian drive in Western noetics had commonly supposed or implied. Every propositional truth is limited in explicitness and thus demands interpretation. Every statement is embedded in history, nonverbal history even more than verbal history. As has just been stated, total verbal explicitness is impossible.

In this last statement, for example, I have not made verbally clear what is meant by “explicitness.” But hearers can *sense* quite adequately what is meant. The Latin *explicare*, from which we derive our *explicit*, means to unfold, as a piece of cloth or papyrus. We readily sense the analogy between unfolding and verbal explanation, but no one can give an absolutely total philosophical and/or phenomenological account of exactly what the details of this analogy come to, no more no less. We need not be entirely explicit about explicitness. For we get the sense of the statement

that totally verbal explicitness is impossible from more than just the words in the statement. We sense the analogy from our experience of the world around us, and that suffices in a given case.

The truth of the most clear-cut proposition is *never* within the words alone, but in the words-plus-existential-context. As the earlier mentioned title of Paolo Valesio's (1986) book puts it, *Ascoltare il silenzio* (that is, *Listen to the Silence*, or *Listen to What They Are Not Saying*, so as to understand what they are saying), and Tyler's (1978) earlier cited title, *The Said and the Unsaid*, recommends similar cautions. The tremendous shared experience out of which two persons with a shared cultural background make their utterances is what gives them the full sense of the utterances—which would be puzzling or utterly incomprehensible to persons without the shared experience. This is why persons of utterly diverse cultural backgrounds often find it hard or impossible to understand what each other are saying.

5. Textual Bias, Fundamentalisms, and the “I”

Textual bias, proneness to identify words with text and only the text, encourages religious fundamentalists, cultural fundamentalists, and other fundamentalists, but also perhaps most persons, declared fundamentalists or not, in a culture so addicted to literacy as that of the United States, to believe that truth, of various sorts or even of all sorts, can be neatly enclosed in a proposition or a limited set of propositions that are totally explicit and self-contained, not needing or indeed even tolerating any interpretation. This runs contrary to Gödel's theorem, earlier mentioned, which in essence, shows that a self-contained system—mathematical in Gödel's proof, but by extension, a self-contained noetic system of any sort—is impossible. Any purportedly closed system is bound to contain unresolved oppositions. Every utterance in a purportedly closed system ultimately has to be supported somehow, directly or indirectly, from the outside.

In the case of Christian fundamentalists, for example, what they commonly may not advert to is the biblical statement of Jesus's: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Jesus leaves his followers no list of a given number of propositional statements that total up all that he comes to utter as the Word of God. There is no way even for the Word of God to

do this. In Christian teaching, full truth reaches beyond, transcends any propositional statement. This statement by Jesus reaches beyond itself, via the personal “I,” to indicate that full truth, self-contained truth is not a statement at all, but *is* nothing less than a *person*.

The person not only of Jesus, for a believer, but the person of every human being, for believers and nonbelievers, lies in a way beyond statement. The “I” that any one of us speaks lies beyond statement in the sense that although every statement originates, ultimately, from an “I,” no mere statement can ever make clear what constitutes this “I” as against any other “I” spoken by any other human being.

“I” is not a name. “I” is not a noun, but a pronoun, something in place of a noun or name (Latin *pro*, “in place of”), for the person uttering “I” can be referred to by various nouns or names: a human being, a woman or a man, a Vietnamese, a Canadian, an athlete, Margaret, James, and so on. (In English the words *name* and *noun* derive from the same Indo-European root. Latin uses the same word, *nomen*, to mean either a name or, grammatically, a noun.)

Names are always given or applied to what they refer to. No thing and no person comes equipped with a name. Names come from the outside. A name is either “given” to a person or thing, or, in the case of a person, may be “taken” by the person. No person is born with any name at all. Nothing in the universe comes fitted with a name: every name is exterior to what it denotes. Because it is something applied from the outside, in slang parlance a name, especially a personal name, is readily called and sensed as a “handle.” As a “handle,” a name makes it possible to manipulate what it is attached to.

The “I” that a person utters is not *given* to the person at all, as his or her name is. Unlike one’s name, the “I” comes from the inside, from the interior of the person uttering it and has its referentiality in terms of an interior. “I” expresses itself by uttering or “outering” itself from inside consciousness (*utter* is etymologically a variant of *outer*). Here, in the case of the “I,” what the “handle” would be attached to somehow eludes the reach of the one using the “handle.” The “I” is precisely too interior to be accessed by any “handle.”

The “I” that one person speaks sounds just like the “I” that another person speaks. There is no way to express externally what differentiates any one “I” from any other “I.” Individuals can be differentiated by their names, once they have been given names, which, as has been seen, are

external “handles,” appendages fastened on from the outside. “I” is a *pronoun*, something in place of a noun (Latin *pro*, “in place of”). Since each utterly different person uses the same sounded or textualized “I” (or its equivalent in whatever language is being spoken), what a particular “I” refers to is actually known only as a particular presence of a particular interior (but outwardly directed) consciousness. The presence of one person is utterly different from the presence of another person.

Here is the paradigm of all sense of “presence”: the presence of one *person* to another *person* or other *persons*. A nonhuman animal, and *a fortiori* nonliving thing, is not a “presence” to a human being in the way another human being is. As compared to what we sense face-to-face with another human being, we all know the emptiness that stares out from an animal’s eye.¹

The “I” that each of the billions of persons in the world utters is each one’s own, as a name never is, because the “I” emerges from inside the person himself or herself, from inside his or her own interior consciousness, where no other human being exists.

No one else can say “I” and make it mean what it means when I say “I.” When you try, saying “I am speaking of what you mean when you say ‘I,’” In “what you mean when you say ‘I,’” your word that refers *directly* to me is not the “I” but the “you.”

“You” is similarly not a name applied from outside. It is felt by the interlocutor as belonging to the interior of the one the “I” is addressing. “You” indicates that the person who utters it is in some kind of immediate psychological contact with the person to whom “you” refers, a contact inaccessible simply with names (nouns).

Because “I” and “you” are utterly unlike the rest of discourse, when a name for the particular “I” or “you” occurs appositively in a text, it is set off with commas (or in oral discourse, with changes of pitch and pauses): “I, Mary, certify to you, John, that my statement is true.” Somehow, “I” and “you” establish a level of discourse in which names referring to the “I” and/or “you” are an intrusion. “I” and “you” operate in a special and deeper way because of their source or grounding in the human interior, which is not accessed by a name.

Linguistically “I” and “you” are referred to as “floaters”: “I” means whoever says it, “you” means whoever is being addressed. “I” and “you” are

¹ Fuller discussion in Ong 1967:298-308, etc.

not nouns but *pronouns*, name substitutes. As words, “I” and “you” are not of themselves attached to any designatable object or person other than the person by whom or to whom they here and now happen to be “uttered” (or “outered,” as noted above). There are other “floaters” in language, all of them determined by their reference, direct or indirect, to the ambiance of a particular “I” or “you,” expressing something by reference to the individual’s own personal world or awareness: for example, here, now, then, there, soon, and so on.

The most radically unambiguous words in any language are the words for “I” and “you,” as spoken in direct dialogue. “I” and “you,” or their equivalents in any language, do not demand or indeed tolerate interpretation or hermeneutic. Either you “get” them, make the connection with them, or you do not. When I say “I” and you fail to connect, I might undertake some maneuvers, verbal or other, to enable to you “connect” with me, but I have no way to give you an interpretation or a hermeneutic of what the “I” might “mean.”

Discourse founded in the direct relationship of “I” and “you” (singular sense, formerly expressed by “thou”) represents a different level of discourse from that where only nouns (representing not persons directly, but things, and persons only indirectly) are in control, as Martin Buber decades ago made clear in his *I and Thou* (1923).

Since each “I” must sense the “you” whom the “I” addresses before speech begins, dialogue demands, paradoxically enough, that the persons addressing one another be somehow aware of the interior of each other before they can begin to communicate verbally. Although we have no way of retrieving the point in human history at which the first words or words were spoken, we can be quite sure of certain underlying features that speech possesses from the beginning. In verbal communication, the hearer must be aware that the speaker intends the utterance to be a word or words and not just noise; the speaker must know that the hearer knows this, and the hearer must know that the speaker knows that he or she (the hearer) knows it. The hermeneutic circle again. We are somehow inside one another’s consciousnesses *before* we begin to speak to another or others.

Otherwise, there is no way to *say* anything.

6. A Note on Fingers and Digits

Digitization means treatment of data in terms of numerically distinct units. A digit today commonly means a numerical unit such as digitization employs—in computer programs 0 and 1. The English *digitization* and *digit* both derive from the Latin term *digitus*, which means a finger or a toe, as the English term *digit* still does at times.

In many, though not all, cultures, the child uses his or her own fingers and/or toes to learn counting, that is, digitization. Reflection on the etymologies of the words *digit*, *digitize*, and their cognates and on the structure of fingers and toes shows how digitization is grounded in the human lifeworld in a remarkably human way. The fingers and/or toes are separate from one another at their tips, but part of you at their bases. Using fingers and/or toes, the infant, fearful of separation, as is well known, in his or her initially and provisionally intact world of infant-and-mother, can count effectively and with some security because, so clearly separated at their tips, the fingers and toes are securely attached to the body and manipulable. It is common with children counting with their fingers or toes to *touch* each of them successively. This reassures the child that the neatly tip-separated digits are still theirs, part of themselves somehow, not threatening total dismemberment or disintegration.

This human rooting of digitization is never quite eliminated: Leith (1990) has shown how the ultimate starting point for computerization is not abstract but concretely sociological, as has been noted earlier. A computer program begins with a decision to start this way rather than that way, with this question rather than that question—a decision made and formulated in the human lifeworld, not within a computer. Computers, after all, do not breed themselves. They come out of the human lifeworld, are tools, extensions of human beings (not vice versa). Computers are artificial, but in being so are eminently human. For there is nothing more natural to human beings than to be artificial. Digits start by being connected with the person.

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What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling

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But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, "What a strange and entertaining story!" Shahrazad replied, "What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live!"

The following night Shahrazad said. . . .

(Haddawy 1990:18 and *passim*)¹

Thus nature interrupts the storyteller, in this case Shahrazad, narrator of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. Although the day breaks in at more or less regular intervals, it almost always takes us by surprise as we are engrossed in the tale that the narrator spins. As readers our experience of the tales is somewhat different from that of the listening audience portrayed in the text, yet the complexity of the narrative seduces us just as it does Shahrayar. As a master storyteller, Shahrazad compels Shahrayar to forget the real world in which he plans to execute her and instead enter the world of the narrative. Similarly, the modern reader may leave behind the twentieth-century literate world and become part of the listening audience, experiencing the oral tradition through the means of the frame tale that manages to bridge the gap between traditional and literary narrative. And what of the medieval audience whose culture and artists created the genre? How did they respond to a narrative that was written and yet evoked the oral performance context through both content and form?

¹ With the exception of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, all cited texts have been consulted in the original languages, but I have chosen to make all citations from English translations in order to provide for greater cohesion within the paper.

While previous scholarship has greatly advanced our understanding of individual frame tales, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron*, and *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, little has been said in regard to the genre itself. Part of this lack is certainly due to the wide variety of works that have been included under this rubric at one time or another. The genre spans centuries and cultures; indeed, one of its most fascinating features is its inherent flexibility. Because it seemingly encompasses so many narrative forms and traditions, the frame tale has escaped precise definition and study. While this essay can by no means answer all the questions that the term “frame tale” generates, it will provide a context for further discussion, particularly in regard to the unique role of the frame tale in the orality/literacy continuum of the Middle Ages.

Definitions and Distinctions

A frame tale is not simply an anthology of stories. Rather, it is a fictional narrative (usually prose but not necessarily so) composed primarily for the purpose of presenting other narratives. A frame tale depicts a series of oral storytelling events in which one or more characters in the frame tale are also narrators of the interpolated tales. I use the word “interpolated” here to refer to any of the shorter tales that a framing story surrounds. While frame tales vary considerably in their length and complexity,² each has an impact on the stories it encompasses extending far beyond that of mere gathering and juxtaposition. The frame tale provides a context for reading, listening, and, of course, interpreting the interior tales. Despite its power over its contents, however, the frame tale alone is rather weak. It derives its meaning largely from what it contains and thus does not stand independently from the tales enclosed within it. Conversely, however, an interpolated tale can stand alone or appear in a different frame, albeit with a different connotation.

Some of the works that I would include in the definition of “frame tale” also have been called such things as “novellae,” “boxing tales,” or simply “stories within stories.” The genre appears to have been an eastern invention, most likely originating in India, where it can be traced back at

² I would not, however, consider in this definition a framing story that enclosed only one tale.

least three millennia (Blackburn 1986:527), and then moving through the Near East. In Europe, although the form appears earlier—Johannes wrote the *Dolopathos* version of *The Seven Sages of Rome* in the twelfth century, and Alfonso X commissioned the translation of *Kalila wa-Dimna* into Spanish in the thirteenth—the frame tale reached its height of popularity in the fourteenth century. And while the genre was prominent throughout European literature in the medieval period, as the Middle Ages waned so did the frame tale.

Some of the best known and most studied frame tales are the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, the Persian *Tuti-Nameh* (*Tales of a Parrot*), the Arabic *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Thousand Nights and a Night*) and *Kalila wa-Dimna* (a version of the *Panchatantra*), the many versions of *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*,³ Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis*, Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor*,⁴ Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does indicate the variety of the genre.

Just as important to the definition as what it includes is what it omits. I do not consider as frame tales collections of tales that do not have a primarily narrative frame, e.g., the *Lais* of Marie de France, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid; nor more complex narratives that would retain much of their significance without the inclusion of their interpolated tales: e.g., Homer's *Odyssey*, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. While all these works clearly make use of framing devices, they are not frame tales under the definition I have proposed, and thus are not included in the following discussion.

The great variety encompassed by the term “frame tale” can be further subdivided. One of these categories is the student/teacher tale, such as the *Disciplina Clericalis* or *Conde Lucanor*. Primarily didactic in intent, this type has a single narrator who is a teacher or counselor telling stories to educate his student, usually a prince. These tales also fall within a larger

³ *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome* are the titles of the eastern and western branches, respectively, of the same frame tale, which is extant in over 40 different versions.

⁴ The *Libro de buen amor* contains songs as well as stories, and its frame is more tenuous than those of the others, but it is nevertheless similar enough to be included in the genre.

genre of advice books, sometimes called “Mirrors for Princes.” The framing stories within this category usually portray an extended conversation between teacher and student where the student will ask a question that the teacher answers, using a tale to illustrate the lesson. John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* provides an allegorical example of this genre, where Genius takes on the role of teacher and storyteller.

The other frame tales are primarily entertaining and can have any number of narrators, listeners, and themes, thus depicting a variety performance contexts. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* has a single narrator, Shahrazad, who tells tales to entertain her tyrannical husband, eventually softening his heart and changing his mind. The *Kalila wa-Dimna* resembles the fable tradition in that its narrators are jackals rather than human beings. Kalila, the cautious and law-abiding brother, trades stories with his devious and ambitious brother Dimna. The versions of *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome* have from seven to nine narrators. Seven sages, a malicious queen, and a prince use their narrations to convince the king of the prince’s guilt or innocence in a trial-like setting. The *Libro de buen amor* has four narrators, one of whom is an allegorical representation of Love, and contains its tales within two extended debates over divine vs. worldly love. Both Boccaccio and Marguerite, who clearly patterns her tale after that of Boccaccio, have ten narrators. Boccaccio depicts seven women and three male companions who tell stories to pass the time while they isolate themselves from the plague. Marguerite’s ten narrators, five men and five women, are stranded together in an abbey because of a flood, and they too decide to pass the time by sharing stories. Finally, Chaucer has a total of 23 narrators, including himself, who tell each other tales on their pilgrimage to Canterbury.⁵ Often the interpolated tales in these more entertaining frames are bawdy or comic. It is important to realize, however, that such subdivisions are not mutually exclusive. The teacher/student type of tale may include bawdy tales and the ostensibly entertaining frame tale always includes serious messages for its audience, whether they be overt or veiled. An author often uses this dual nature of the entertaining frame tale to place a heavier burden of interpretation on his audience:

⁵ While there are more proposed narrators on the pilgrimage, the extant manuscripts only contain the tales of twenty-three. The issue of the supposed incompleteness of this text and the *Heptameron* is discussed below.

Again, such as they are, these stories, like everything else, can work both harm and profit, according to the disposition of the listener.

(*Decameron*; Payne 1982:796)

And so this book of mine, to every man or woman, to the prudent and the imprudent, to whomever would understand the good and elect salvation and do good works in the love of God, and also to whomever may desire foolish worldly love—whichever path he may wish to walk—this book can say truly to each one: *I will give thee understanding, et cetera.*

(*Libro de buen amor*; Daly 1977:27)

The distinction is thus one of degree. The interpolated tales do not exert total control; each type of frame can and often does contain many types of tales. Because they generally depict public storytelling events, the more entertaining frame tales will be focused upon here, but many of the same observations can be made regarding the more didactic frames.

Framing structures also oscillate between two general types: tight and loose (Jaunzems 1978:45). The tighter the frame, the more control it exerts over the content of the interpolated tales, tending to make the collection more unified. Conversely, a looser frame will contain more variety. A more didactic frame tale will tend also to be tighter: if a student asks a question concerning the loyalty of friends, the teacher is somewhat limited in his choice of tale. If, however, the intent of the tale is to entertain, as is usually the case in *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the narrator can choose any theme so long as it holds the audience's attention.⁶ An entertaining frame does not mean that the content cannot be controlled, however. In fact, in the *Decameron* and *Heptameron* different characters take charge of different days and suggest the day's theme, and, for the most part, the narrators comply. Of course, any distinction in a genre as varied as this one can only be suggestive. Yet an author like Juan Ruiz seemingly breaks some unwritten rules by having a narrator claim to be teaching one lesson, while narrating a story that illustrates quite a different one. If one believes this variation is intentional, then the frame of the *Libro de buen amor* is actually parodic, making it quite tight. If, as some have argued, the contradiction is merely accidental, then one would conclude that the frame is loose. Those who choose the latter interpretation would argue that the

⁶ Nevertheless, the frame of the *Thousand Nights and a Night* is somewhat tightened by the prevalent theme of telling a story to save a life.

transition from oral tale to literate argument creates a haphazard fit between the interpolated tale and its context, but this type of assumption does a great disservice not only to the complexity of the oral tradition, but also to the skill of the medieval author.

The frame tale genre spans not only cultures but also the so-called “divide” between orality and literacy. Because it depicts oral storytelling events, yet clearly exists in written form in the Middle Ages, the frame tale falls into this area that we are still struggling to identify and analyze. This characteristic led Walter J. Ong to some insightful and provocative comments on the frame tale within a larger discussion of the qualities of medieval orality and literacy (1977:70):

The frame story was in fact quite common around Europe at this period [fourteenth century]. Audience readjustment was a major feature of mature medieval culture, a culture more focused on reading than any earlier culture had been. Would it not be helpful to discuss the frame device as a contrivance all but demanded by the literary economy of the time rather than to expatiate on it as a singular stroke of genius? For this it certainly was not, unless we define genius as the ability to make the most of an awkward situation. The frame is really a rather clumsy gambit, although a good narrator can bring it off pretty well when he has to. It hardly has widespread immediate appeal for ordinary readers today.

While he refers here to *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron*, Ong’s comments are suggestive to our reading of any frame tale. The frame tale was certainly not a “singular stroke of genius,” at least not in the fourteenth century. Rather, it provides a means of textualizing the oral tradition. And although I would disagree with the “clumsy gambit” characterization, I believe that analysis of the role of the frame tale in an oral/literate continuum,⁷ particularly in regard to audience reception, will reveal to us important information about not only the frame tale but also the unique relationship between oral tradition and literate production in the Middle Ages.

⁷ I borrow this term from Tannen 1982.

Some Characteristics of the Frame Tale

Several characteristics of the frame tale lent themselves well to its reception by medieval audiences. First of all, the frame tale is almost infinitely flexible, enabling it to contain tales of many themes, lengths, and styles. The interpolated tales could be taken from both literate and oral traditions, thus providing authors and narrators with an almost limitless supply of material. Johannes de Alta Silva, in his *Dolopathos*,⁸ writes that he has heard rather than read his tales (Hilka 1913:95): “These tales, which I did not read but heard, were written by me to please and instruct the reader.” Other tales can be traced to literate sources, such as Juan Ruiz’s adaptation of some of Aesop’s fables in the *Libro de buen amor*. The frame tale thus draws upon not only a variety of rhetorical styles, but also a variety of sources.

Secondly, because of this flexibility, a frame tale, particularly one with a looser structure, could carry traditional tales over time and space. It is quite possible that a compiler or storyteller could have heard or read a frame tale containing interpolated stories that he might not have used within his version of the same frame tale, but then used them or passed them on in another context. Indeed, in a volume devoted to tracing the sources and analogues of the *Canterbury Tales* (Bryan and Dempster 1958), the authors include Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and English versions of *The Seven Sages of Rome* among Chaucer’s possible sources. There is no reason not to believe that oral versions of some frame tales could have performed the same function, although this phenomenon obviously is difficult to prove through extant texts. All enframed tales would be part of the greater available corpus of traditional narratives from which authors and storytellers drew.

Thirdly, because of this same flexibility, the frame tale could be adapted to a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts. Through various means of translation and transmission, a frame tale such as *The Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* crossed cultural boundaries with relative ease.⁹ The fairly uncomplicated frame story could be revised into a product that was within the horizon of expectations of a local audience while still preserving elements of its sometimes exotic origin. At the same time, the

⁸ A version of *The Seven Sages of Rome*.

⁹ There are a number of different theories regarding the origin and transmission of this collection. See particularly Comparetti 1882, Perry 1959, and Epstein 1967.

composer/compiler of the new version could take stories out and replace them with others more to his audience's liking. Indeed, the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* provides an excellent example of this adaptability. The collection existed in almost every European language as well as many eastern ones and in at least 40 different versions in the Middle Ages, and while there is great variation among the versions, one can see that they are all versions of a single frame tale.

The popularity and longevity of a particular frame tale would then be dependent to a large extent upon its flexibility and adaptability. As long as authors and compilers could keep the tale and its interpolated tales current with audience tastes, the tale would live on. This mutability would explain, for example, why the *Seven Sages of Rome* continued to be popular in Spain after it had disappeared from other traditions. Spanish translators imported at least four distinct versions of the collection over four hundred years, and then continued to change them, thus maintaining interest in successive generations of audiences.¹⁰ Moreover, the popularity of a single frame tale could create a market for imitations, which also served to extend the tradition of the genre. We can see this chain of events occurring in the case of the *Decameron*, which inspired numerous translations and imitations, even though most modern scholars agree that few compare to the original. Along with other factors, the lesser quality of these works may also have contributed to the decline of the genre even as they extended it. Created by imitation rather than tradition, they did not inspire the same degree of loyalty in the audience.

Elasticity in composition and reception negates any notion of completeness in the frame tale. Some nineteenth-century editors and translators attempted to determine exactly how *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, for example, can be divided into 1,001 nights. The obsession with the number 1,001 also led redactors, scribes, and translators to add other traditional tales in order to "complete" the collection.¹¹ There is now general agreement among Arabists, however, that the title is not to be taken so literally. The number 1,000 merely signifies a very large number; to add

¹⁰ The reception and development of the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* in Spain is the subject of another article, currently in progress.

¹¹ In the case of the *Thousand Nights and a Night*, the other side of this notion of the whole leads scholars to label all additions to the "original" text as spurious, raising a question as to what "original" means in the context of traditional narrative.

one is to indicate a number approaching infinity. Similarly, arguments over how many stories the “complete” *Canterbury Tales* should contain or why one of the seven sages might tell more than one tale on his given day of narration are based on an entirely literate idea of completeness. Granted, the condition of the manuscripts leads to these conclusions. The fact that the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Heptameron* each survives not in one definitive manuscript but in a series of fragments makes conclusions hard to draw. The authors indicate in their prologues that there will be a set number of tales told over the course of a predetermined period of time in the case of Marguerite and a predetermined distance in Chaucer. Yet the oral tradition is unpredictable and flexible; in depicting it, the author whose text does not follow through to the exact number of tales indicated in the prologue may never have intended it to be “complete.” Boccaccio’s rigidity in this regard seems to be more the exception than the rule. Moreover, part of the fascination of both medieval and modern audiences for the frame tale is its seeming endlessness. Because these texts are in large part derived from traditional sources, the whole of the tale lies in the tradition as a whole and not in any one version of it. Indeed, the project of looking for or imagining a complete version of any one frame tale is perhaps as futile as trying to determine what constitutes the “real” *Iliad*. One may argue, and rightly so, that a frame tale is customarily much more a part of a literate tradition than the epic, but it is a literate genre that continually looks back into the oral tradition for inspiration and narrative material and so preserves many of the elements of oral narrative, even as it textualizes them.

The Rhetorical Persistence of Traditional Forms¹²

By depicting an oral composition and performance and drawing from traditional sources, the frame tale provides the medieval audience with a continuity of reception between the act of listening and that of reading. As Ong suggests, the frame tale can show a literate listening audience how it might become a reading audience. It displays in print form a situation familiar to medieval audiences—the oral composition and performance of narrative. The frame tale essentially textualizes traditional storytelling as the

¹² I borrow this term from chapter 3 of John Miles Foley’s book *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995).

audiences become more accustomed to texts. Therefore, it can adequately serve both the listening and reading audiences.

One must remember, however, that the frame tale is neither purely nor exclusively the product of literacy. Indeed, complex frames also live in the oral tradition, and are sometimes even dependent upon the performance context. More than fifty years ago, Linda Dégh discovered frame tales in the Hungarian oral tradition (1944), an observation that has not received the attention and further research it deserves.¹³ Far from being too complex a device for the oral composer, the frame enabled storytellers to keep the attention of their audiences, particularly when the telling would stretch over a series of days or nights. By creating a frame, a composer could maintain a contextual continuity, linking a series of stories from day to day. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* lives in versions today in much the same way (Haddawy 1990:ix). Familiar with the frame tale of Shahrazad and Shahrayar, an audience can always request “another of Shahrazad’s stories” from a storyteller. Because the frame story itself is so embedded in the minds of the audience, the composer would not even have to repeat it. Rather, he or she can begin by merely saying, “The next night Shahrazad said, ‘It is related to me, O King . . .’.” The teller can then embark on the telling of any one of a number of tales in his or her repertoire. It is also possible that a frame tale, particularly a “tight” one, could have served as a mnemonic device. If the storyteller usually told the same story in the same place, the frame tale might have helped him to remember elements of the interpolated tale. In terms of structural complexity, one might even argue that the cumulative tale, a popular folk genre, is every bit as demanding of the memory of teller and audience as is the frame tale.

Of course, we cannot prove with certainty that the frame tale was a popular oral traditional genre in the Middle Ages. In the form we have it in medieval manuscripts, it is obviously the product of a literate author or redactor. Nevertheless, it retains traditional forms, even as it textualizes the tradition. Moreover, as is the case with much of medieval literature, it was probably performed or recited, thus bringing it back into the oral tradition for its reception. We can see this “rhetorical persistence of traditional forms” at three levels: language, structure, and character.

In the case of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the traditional linguistic register is plain to see because even manuscript versions of this

¹³ My thanks to Steve Czurigia for his English translation of this article.

frame tale still demonstrate many instances of colloquial rather than classical Arabic.¹⁴ For this reason, among others, the tale was not considered “literature” until quite recently. In the Arabic literary tradition, “literature” is poetry composed in classical Arabic; thus many traditional forms were omitted from scholarly discussions for centuries. Not until after the collection received attention from literature scholars in the West did it begin to gain scholarly recognition in the East, where the rise in its acceptance and study was largely a part of a greater trend in folklore studies, inspired by Arab nationalism.

One of the unfortunate occurrences in the snarled textual history of *The Thousand Nights and a Night* is that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors tried to classicize the colloquial diction in order to create editions that were more satisfying to their literate sensibilities. David Pinault describes the vast scope of these emendations (1992:15): “They normalized the spelling of individual words, substituted elevated diction for colloquial expressions, formalized dialogue so as to remove traces of influence from the vernacular, and altered the grammatical structure of sentences to align them with the rules of *fusha* [classical literary Arabic].” Even so, traces of the colloquial language remain. Muhsin Mahdi’s recent edition of a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript (1984) retains more of the colloquial language and gives a sense of what the medieval *Thousand Nights and a Night* looked like. Even though it is a literate production, much of its language is in the traditional colloquial register.

Even frame tales in languages that do not have the marked diglossia of Arabic, however, show the persistence of traditional linguistic forms. Carl Lindahl discusses Chaucer’s use of “folk rhetoric” in *The Canterbury Tales* (1987:96ff.). In particular, he attributes the pilgrim’s use of indirect insult to Chaucer’s attempt to duplicate the speech of commoners. Commoners would not be able to insult someone from a higher class directly for fear of reprisal, so they developed a system of indirect insults that would get their point across safely. Most of the insults in *The Canterbury Tales* take this indirect form. Lindahl further argues that Chaucer relied on these forms in order to protect himself from criticism.

¹⁴ A marked characteristic of the Arabic language is its diglossia. The colloquial, oral form of the language differs considerably from the classical, literate variety. The former lacks many of the formal declensions, and, when simulated in writing, often differs orthographically from the latter.

By displacing the unacceptable stories and common language from his voice to those of his churlish characters, Chaucer allowed himself greater freedom, thus becoming “the most brilliantly innovative and the most folkloric of poets” (167).

Boccaccio, too, borrows some of his language from the oral tradition. He is quite aware of differences between the two modes of communicating, so much so that he uses them in a disclaimer in the conclusion (Payne 1982:796):

And if perchance there be therein some tittle, some wordlet or two, freer, perhaps, than pleases your squeamish hypocritical prudes, who weigh words rather than deeds and study more to appear good than to be good, I say that it should be no more be forbidden me to write them than it is commonly forbidden to men and women to say all day long *hole* and *peg* and *mortar* and *pestle* and *sausage* and *baloney* and all manner of suchlike things.

There are those words we say and those we write. Boccaccio argues, albeit ironically here, that the distinction should not be quite so rigid. He is, after all, depicting oral storytelling; why not use the vocabulary that his narrators would use in an actual oral context? Anything less would be to sacrifice the accuracy of his presentation.

Boccaccio also recognizes the choices made in speaking and reciting orally. Not every word is always appropriate, but he argues that the context he has constructed allows him considerable freedom (*idem*):

Moreover, it is easy enough to see that these things are spoken, not in the church, of the affairs whereof it behooves to speak with a mind and in terms alike of the chastest (albeit among its histories there are tales enough to be found of quite other fashion than those written by me), nor yet in the schools of philosophy, where decency is no less required than elsewhere, nor among churchmen or philosophers anywhere, but amidst gardens, in a place of delight and diversion and among men and women, though young, yet of mature wit and not to be led astray by stories, at a time when it was not forbidden to the most virtuous to go, for their preservation, with their breeches on their heads.

While it is clear that Boccaccio does not have a primary intention here of accurately depicting a performance context, he does clearly recognize the variety of language. Just as certain words are generally present only in oral

discourse, so, too, certain words are relegated to certain contexts within the oral tradition. Aware of these differences, he chooses to use those of the oral tradition and the storytelling event rather than the more seemly ones of the literate tradition and philosophical or religious discourse. Boccaccio thus plays with his contemporary audience and defends himself against the probable condemnation of his tales, but at the same time he shows the modern reader that a medieval author can recognize the differences among different performance contexts and manipulate them according to his own purposes.

The variety of the frame tale provides us then with a variety of traditional linguistic structures. In the case of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the traditional language seems directly the result of the oral origins of the tales and their language. Indeed, the fact that we can see editors trying to “improve” the language shows that a state of diglossia between oral and literate narrative exists, but that the frame tale includes aspects of both. In the later frame tales where we can identify a single author, the situation is not quite so clear. Certainly some traditional forms still persist due to the oral origins of the tales. At the same time, however, a Chaucer or Boccaccio may use some forms intentionally in order to make his depiction of the storytelling event appear more authentic. The extent to which traditional language exists in these works as a conscious move on the part of the author is difficult to assess.

The frame tale is not popular with modern audiences, and indeed in most cultures interest in it waned along with the Middle Ages. Part of the reason for this decline was due to the structure of the frame, which the modern literate audience sees as “repetitive.” Much like actual storytelling events, the structure of the frame tale is similar from day to day or night to night. The participants gather under comparable circumstances for each storytelling session, and the stories themselves often resemble each other so closely that the external audience finds distinguishing among them difficult.

The stories of Shahrazad are divided and often interrupted by the coming of dawn. The day arrives at more or less regular intervals, providing a formulaic cadence for the narrative. In print versions of this tale collection, one can expect a new day every few pages that provokes an identical reaction in the narrator each time: “But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence.” These formulaic divisions at once recall the oral narrative style and give the impression of a realistic storytelling event in which the skilled narrator can spin tales endlessly

through the night, interrupted only by the force of nature. Just as the audience is sure of the fact that day will come at more or less regular intervals, so too is the narrative interrupted according to the same rhythm.

These intrusions into the narrative flow often come in the middle of stories, leading many critics to believe that they are a primarily literate device put in place to create suspense, both for the internal and external audiences. Yet their very regularity belies this assumption. Moreover, many of the stories contained in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* are traditional, and we can assume that the audience would be familiar with them already, obviating the need for creating suspense in our modern sense of the word. At the same time, however, an oral storyteller also might wish to conclude the evening in the middle of a story in the hope that his or her audience would return the next evening, precisely what Shahrazad must do to preserve her life. The interruptions recall the oral tradition, where a round of storytelling might continue over a period of days (or nights), which would be interrupted at more or less regular intervals. In an Islamic society in particular, the session would have to end at dawn so that narrator and audience alike could perform the morning prayers before sunrise. The *Tuti-Nameh*, which is in more inflexible form than *The Thousand Nights and a Night* in the extant manuscripts and has a named author, also uses the device of dawn to interrupt the narrative. Here, however, all pretense of a natural division is lost because each night comprises a single story, and the nights are of varying lengths. Thus what seems natural and tradition-inspired in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* acquires an artificiality in a more literate work.

Structural repetition appears in other frame tales, albeit in other forms. In the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* tradition, the repetitive structure is a necessary element of the plot. The storytelling session must fill the seven days during which the prince is forbidden from speaking. Consequently, the queen makes her accusation against the prince and calls for his execution each day, and each day one of the sages responds with a tale. From one day to the next the scenario does not change, and the stories could easily be shuffled without any impact on the story. The structuring constitutes an extended formula. Just as we expect a feasting scene in an epic to follow certain patterns, so we observe the narrative competition depicted in the frame tale to be the same from day to day. The *Libro de buen amor*, too, despite its structural irregularities, has a consistent pattern in those sections where the tales are incorporated. Each of the two

tale debates concerns the same topic as the collection as a whole—the virtues of divine versus worldly love—and each is organized in the same way as the debaters alternate arguments and illustrate these arguments with tales and fables. Both this collection and the *Seven Sages* versions seem to derive their structure as much from the rules of formal debate as from genres of oral performance.

As the frame tale becomes more literary, this structure of recurring scenes changes. Authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer try to vary events from day to day and narrative to narrative so that each performance event will be distinct. To a large extent they succeed, but not entirely. We still have similar circumstances surrounding each storytelling event, even though the author tries to incorporate variation. In the *Decameron*, for example, each character/narrator is responsible for a day, setting ground rules for the activities and choosing a theme for the day's stories. Each narrator contributes a story each day, and the majority of the tales reflect the theme of the collection as a whole, which is the relationship between men and women. Unlike the *Seven Sages*, where men and women are in conflict, here the competition is lighthearted, as are many of the tales. Even though Boccaccio provides variations, however, recurring structures and themes persist. In later imitations of the *Decameron*, the repetition becomes wooden, lacking the vibrancy of Boccaccio's text. These imitations show more signs of literate tinkering that distances them from the liveliness of oral tradition which the *Decameron* retains. These later authors also include structural repetition in their texts, but as in the case of the *Tuti-Nameh*, it has become merely a device for separating the stories rather than a look back at traditional patterns.

If we see the insertion of structural variance as a goal of a literate frame tale composer, then Chaucer is the most successful. *The Canterbury Tales* presents particular problems for any discussion of structure, of course, because of its existence in fragments. Nevertheless, we can see that Chaucer's plan for his collection was different than that of Boccaccio or any of the anonymous compilers of earlier frame tales. First of all, distance and not time is the determinant of the organization. The pilgrims are each invited to tell four tales: two on the way to Canterbury and two on the return trip. Thus the scenario does not really change from day to day, but from narrator to narrator. Chaucer introduces his narrators in the General Prologue and then again in individual prologues before the tales. Structurally, then, each tale is introduced identically with a preamble that

provides information on the narrator, his or her tale and motivation for telling it. Because these prologues are more lengthy and contain more information than the divisions that other frame tale authors use, however, they enable Chaucer to differentiate between narrators and between tales to a greater extent. Thus he balances repetition and variance. One would expect in the type of storytelling competition that is *The Canterbury Tales* that each competitor would want to introduce his or her tale in such a way as to get the most attention from the audience. Chaucer brings this quality of the oral performance into his text by means of his prologues. He also uses them, however, to make each performance unique, and although we may never know what his true intentions toward organizing *The Canterbury Tales* were, we can certainly see his designs in creating a distinct storytelling event for each narrator.

The Mirrors for Princes and wisdom books also contain structural repetition, but here it is usually quite strict and rigid. Each section begins in a similar fashion with the student asking a question of the teacher who then responds with a story. Here the divisions and repetition seem not to have much at all to do with the portrayal of oral performance but rather provide a means of indexing the tales in encyclopedic form. In addition, many of the sections or chapters not only are numbered but have headings as well. One can quickly skim through, for example, and find the tale that has to do with the loyalty of friends or that concerning greed. Because these collections serve as guides for behavior, they are constructed so that the reader can turn to any section as needed. This type of ordering would position the Mirror for Princes in the realm of literacy as defined by Jack Goody (1977), who sees lists and indices as products of the literate mind.

All frame tales by their very nature contain structural repetitions or reiterations. While some of these are clearly the products of literacy, as is the case with the wisdom books, many are persistent reminders of the oral ancestors of these tales. Because recurring structural elements appear in the frame tale for a variety of reasons, however, we cannot use this evidence alone to prove any relationship between the genre and the oral tradition. Taken with other indicators, however, especially those of traditional linguistic registers and traditional characterization, the structural reiterations show that even the most literate of frame tale authors continue to look to the oral tradition for their material.

In terms of characterization, frame tales clearly recall traditional tales. Shahrazad notwithstanding, the majority of characters and narrators

in these tales have no names. Instead, they are identified by some characteristic, often a profession. Even Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, clearly the work of a literate hand, retains this traditional quality. One need only think of the narrators: the miller, the knight, the prioress, and so on. These generic titles give the author flexibility while at the same time providing the audience with something familiar. How many traditional tales begin with the words, "Once upon a time there was a king . . ." ? This device adds to the adaptability of the frame tale because each audience can identify the character or narrator with one with which it is familiar.

Nevertheless, the narrators sometimes do have names in the frame tale, although the characters in their stories usually do not. In some cases the naming of the narrators has a specific purpose. For example, in the wisdom book, the patron for whom the book is intended may be named as the student. Thus the author clearly incorporates his role as teacher into the text itself. Yet the tales themselves often give no indication of their audience, and the narrator and prince, although named, are not distinctive. Any prince could look into the "mirror" of any other and perhaps see himself.

In other frame tales, naming plays a different role. For example, in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, the narrators apparently represent historical figures. Oisille is recognized by most as an anagram for "Loise" and hence "Louise." She may be intended as Marguerite's mother, Louise de Savoie, or Brantôme's grandmother, Louise de Daillon. The name Oisille also suggests *oiselle*, or female bird, opening up numerous possibilities for interpretation. Marguerite appears in the text as Parlamente, apparently a play on two words meaning "pearl," another term loaded with symbolism (Chilton 1984:12). The *Heptameron* is clearly a literate text which draws heavily on Boccaccio, however, making this naming a conscious effort on the part of a literate author to distinguish one character from another.

Distinguishing the characters is accomplished not only through naming, however, and naming is indeed only a minor element of characterization. In the more literary frame tales—*The Canterbury Tales*, *Decameron*, *Heptameron*—the authors take great pains to create actual characters whose personalities differentiate them from one another. Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Marguerite also try to give their narrators distinct identities as narrators so that we cannot, for example, imagine the Wife of Bath telling the Pardoner's Tale. Here again, Chaucer incorporates the

most diversity into his cast of characters. Indeed, much of the uniqueness of each storytelling event in *The Canterbury Tales* is due to the characterization of the narrators, but although the characters are distinct from each other they are frequently typecast by their professions and social status. Perhaps because of the looser structure and seemingly unfinished nature of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is easier for the modern reader to perceive distinct personalities among these narrators. In Boccaccio's and Marguerite's frame tales, the structural repetition and the sheer quantity of stories rob each tale and narrator of some individuality.

In those frame tales more tightly bound to tradition, *The Seven Sages of Rome* or *The Book of Sindibad*, for instance, the characters are much less distinct. Naming does not distinguish one sage from the other; they can be freely interchanged without disturbing the flow of the narrative. If the seventh sage told the tale of the fifth, a reader would not notice any difference in his or her experience of the text. In this particular set of tales, some of the connections between character and narrator are so loose that in certain versions a sage tells a tale that in another version may be included in the stepmother's narration. There is also little sense of different purposes among the narrators. Because the *Seven Sages* tradition is so broad, however, there are exceptions to this uniformity of character. For example, Johannes' *Dolopathos*, the most literary of the western versions, includes Virgil as one of the narrators. He is clearly distinguished from the sages, and it appears that Johannes expects us to associate all of the Roman poet's characteristics with his narration in the *Dolopathos*. He is also the prince's teacher in this version, so his role is yet again distinguished. This version is additionally remarkable in that the king and the prince are also named: Dolopathos and Lucinius, respectively. As Marguerite constructed significant names in the *Heptameron*, here too the names are loaded. Dolopathos has experience of much pain in his life, and having to condemn his only son just adds to the despair; hence his name is constructed from the Latin and Greek words for pain. Lucinius, alone among the prince characters in his conversion to Christianity, has a "light-bearing" name. Johannes' naming of the primary characters in the frame is in keeping with the more literary quality of his version. He repeatedly alludes to the Bible and classical literature, and although he claims his sources are oral (Hilka 1913:107), he clearly wishes to produce a text. Other versions of *The Book of Sindibad* or *The Seven Sages of Rome* for the most part do not name the

king or the prince. They more closely resemble the folktale tradition in their portrayal of characters.

Regardless of how the narrators are distinguished, however, the characters in the tales they tell are even more the product of traditional narrative. Here even fewer names are used and, because many of the stories are similar to one another, the characters often run together. One can readily identify types—the deceitful wife, the gullible husband, the evil counselor, the greedy merchant—but distinct personalities are quite rare. Thus it is not surprising that we can find analogues to many of the interpolated tales in the oral tradition.

Time Frames

The flow of time in the frame tale also indicates the interactions between oral and literary traditions. There are several different time frames at play in any frame tale; the more layers of framing, the more complex the relations become. Thus in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* when the barber tells the story of his fourth brother in “The Hunchback Tale,” the audience simultaneously experiences the narration within five contexts. First, we consider the action as the brother allegedly experienced it; second, we listen to the barber tell the tale to the caliph and third, to the king in the tailor’s rendition of the barber’s performance for the caliph; fourth, Shahrazad is reiterating the same story to Shahrayar in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* through the double filter of the barber; and lastly, the audience listens or reads the tale through the last filter of the current reader or performer. In each of these contexts, time moves at a different pace, and functions in a different way.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, is the paradox inherent in any frame tale regarding its relationship to time. Each time one of the characters rises to tell a story, the action of the frame effectively halts, even though the very telling of each interpolated tale brings the frame closer to its conclusion. As each narrator tells a tale, he or she reminds the audience of the previous and subsequent narrations. Time within the frame thus becomes cyclical, as the action of each narrator reiterates that of the one before. Even if the tale itself is quite different, the circumstances of narration repeat themselves. Like traditional narrative patterns, the time frame upon which this phenomenon relies is cyclic. There is always,

however, another time system operating at the level of the outer framing tale. Here the action is linear. We are approaching a conclusion, destination, or resolution of some kind, and in order to get there, the narration must pass through the repetitive time represented by the interpolated tales. This linear patterning of time is more the norm of literate narrative. Thus we have the two competing notions of time present in one genre. The linear narrative of the frame tale must pause to accommodate the repetition of the interpolated tales, which reiterate similar arguments with similar results. Inversely, the interpolated tales are pulled along by the force of the linear time of the frame. This phenomenon may be one reason for the popularity of the frame tale in the medieval period. As notions of time and narrative changed, the frame tale displayed the very ideas that its audience was dealing with in the real world outside of the frame. For a society becoming increasingly more literate and with an increasingly stronger concept of linear time, the frame tale at once affirmed these new ideas while opening a window back onto the familiar world of traditional narrative.

Narrator/Audience Dynamics and the Portrayal of Performance

While no one would argue that the frame tale presents an accurate depiction of the performance event such as we would expect from the folklorist's field notes, it does make some interesting comments on the dynamics between narrator or composer and audience. It perhaps does not record performance, but it certainly portrays it. Even if we cannot determine the accuracy of the portrayal, perhaps we can look for hints as to how medieval authors saw the performance event. In addition, by studying the depiction of narrator/audience dynamics in the frame tale, we may better understand the close relationship between the frame tale and the oral tradition.

For example, many scholars have commented on the agonistic nature of oral traditional performance.¹⁵ The frame tale confirms this dynamic: narrators are always either competing against each other or against the standards of a very demanding audience that holds the life of the narrator in its hands. Two examples can serve to illustrate this element of the frame

¹⁵ See espec. Ong 1982:43-45.

tale. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Host has offered a prize for the best story, thus setting the stage for competition. Each narrator tries to top the previous one. In *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, Shahrazad has no competition from other narrators, unless one considers the narrators whom she herself creates and ostensibly controls. Instead, her competition lies in her audience. Shahrayar holds her life in his hands. If a story is not adequately diverting, he may at any time return to his old uxoricidal ways.

Similarly, many of the tales Shahrazad tells are also what Gerhardt terms “ransom tales,” where the narrators tell a tale to save his or her life (1963:ch. 5). The “Hunchback Tale” demonstrates the inherent danger of this situation as the tailor, broker, steward, and doctor do not tell adequately wondrous tales and thus are nearly put to death before the barber saves them all with his narration. All of the tales told in this series also have protagonists who have suffered some type of physical mutilation. Most are victims of misunderstandings or unfortunate circumstances, but despite their relative innocence, they are taken for criminals and punished as such. Thus the telling of the stories mirrors the struggle portrayed in the content, and the narrators seem to relish telling the graphic details even as they fear for their own lives and compete against each other and the ruthless standards of the king.

This competition against a nearly impossible standard of excellence in entertainment also often makes the narration empathetic. Empathetic narration has been identified by Havelock (1963:145-46) and Ong (1982:45-46) as another element typical of oral tradition. Because so many of these narrators are telling tales for their own lives or that of another, they have a vested interest in their contents. If the tale depicts a situation similar to the one in which the narrator finds him or herself, this quality of empathy increases. If the audience sympathizes with a character within the tale, perhaps it will also have mercy on the narrator.

The empathy engendered by the frame tale may also shed light on the concentric yet often conflicting time frames discussed above. One may well wonder to which temporal frame the audience pays most attention when there can be as many as five operating simultaneously in a layered frame tale such as *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. The empathy of the listeners for any given narrator would lead them to identify more with the particular performance of that narrator. For example, in *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*, we anxiously anticipate the resolution of the framing story, even though we can assume that truth and the prince will

prevail. If one has an emotional investment in the plot of the frame tale itself, the sages' stories are more a nuisance than anything else, merely filling space while not having any obvious effect on the outcome of the story. The logic of the plot demands the tales, however, and implies that if the sages did not narrate, the prince would certainly lose his life. From the point of view of the external audience, which fully expects the prince to survive, the stories themselves become somewhat irrelevant. Further, if the entire collection is embedded in a larger frame tale, as is the case of *The Book of Sindibad* appearing in the *Tuti-Nameh* or *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the audience may well have developed greater empathy for Tuti or Shahrazad, respectively, and thus pay more attention to whether or not the narrator of the larger frame is fulfilling the task of stretching the narration over the course of an entire evening. On the other hand, in those collections where the frame tale is rather spare in comparison with the interpolated tales (and these comprise the majority), one may welcome the latter in their role as entertainment. Thus while the objective effect of the interpolated tales is always to impede the temporal progress of the frame tale, our subjective reaction to this tension varies depending on our sympathies.

Despite any empathy inspired by the tales, audience interruptions are characteristic of most traditional performances, and in the frame tale, too, interruptions sometimes play a role. Interestingly enough, Chaucer and Boccaccio make greater use of interruptions than the authors and anonymous compilers of other frame tales. It appears that as a frame tale becomes more literate, and *The Canterbury Tales* and *Decameron* are more clearly the products of the literary tradition than earlier tales, it becomes necessary to insert the oral performance keys into the text itself. In the other frame tales, interruptions would be taken for granted, but in the work of Chaucer and Boccaccio, there is a greater self-consciousness at work. The authors are not merely presenting traditional tales but also including their observations of the tradition.

As is the case with other self-conscious or literary characteristics, interruptions of the narration are most marked in *The Canterbury Tales*. And the narrator who is interrupted most rudely and abruptly is the persona of Chaucer himself. As he tells the story of Sir Thopas, Chaucer the pilgrim is interrupted by the Host himself, who cannot tolerate what he deems gross poetic incompetence (Robinson 1957:B² 2109-15):

“Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,”
 Quod oure Hooste, “for thou makest me
 So wery of thy verray lewednesse
 That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
 Myne eres aken of thy drasy speche.
 Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!
 This may wel be rym dogerel,” quod he.

The interruption in this case serves to construct irony in the text by portraying the persona of the author as a poor poet, particularly in comparison to the other narrators. By reserving the harshest criticism for his own persona, Chaucer heightens the humor of the narration while allowing that tale-telling is an art as well as a valuable skill.

Perhaps the most fascinating portrayal of narrator/audience dynamics in the frame tale is that of the power of the tale. As Robert Georges has shown, the storytelling event influences the social positions of both narrator and audience for the duration of the performance (1969:318): “as the storytelling event is generated, the social identities of storyteller and story listener become increasingly prominent while the other social identities coincident with these during the storytelling event decrease in relative prominence.” While holding the floor, the narrator is the most powerful figure in the performance context. Thus a lowly miller, providing he is a skilled storyteller, can exert the same power over Chaucer’s pilgrims as does the noble knight. Whoever is narrating dominates the social hierarchy of the performance event, regardless of his or her station in any other context. A good tale well told is shown to be quite powerful in the frame tale’s portrayal of oral performance: it can help to pass the time, help one forget plagues and floods, and even reverse death sentences. A tale can save or end a life depending on how entertaining or convincing it is in the opinion of the audience, and the teller who controls it thus controls the fate of the listeners.

The mindful audience can appropriate this power, however. In several of the frame tales, the person responsible for communicating the tales to the reader is not a storyteller himself, but merely a reporter of action. Chaucer deftly takes on this role, as he ridicules the composing abilities of his persona within the text but at the same time makes it clear to the external audience of *The Canterbury Tales* that as author he is quite skilled. The incompetent storyteller bears the ultimate responsibility for the broad dissemination of the tales, thus taking the power from the more

skilled oral composers and making it his own through writing.

Boccaccio does much the same thing in the *Decameron*. When he interrupts the narrative at the beginning of the fourth day, he too begins to tell a story, but he does not allow himself to finish it, claiming that he is not in the same league as those whose tales he passes on to the reader. This posturing serves two purposes. First, as author he distances himself from his own text by insisting that he merely presents the tales of others. This ironic distancing allows him to fend off criticism from those who believe his tales to be too risqué. Second, even if he interrupts his own tale primarily to cast off responsibility for the other tales, he still shows himself to be an incompetent storyteller in comparison to the ten narrators he portrays. After all, they each tell ten complete stories while he cannot finish even the one he starts. Of course, despite any refusing of responsibility or demonstration of incompetence as a storyteller, Boccaccio himself brings us the tales and thus wields the ultimate power over the reading or listening audience.

Perhaps the best example of the usurpation of the tale's power, however, comes from *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. When the king of China has heard the wondrous story of the barber and all the related narratives in "The Hunchback's Tale," he orders that they be recorded. The Caliph Haroun ar-Rashid does the same in the story of "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," also contained within *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. Finally, when Shahrazad has finished her narration and Shahrayar has forgiven her, he orders that her wondrous stories be recorded in gold (although one wonders how after three years' worth of nights, Shahrazad will remember all the stories, let alone find the time to reiterate each one). The king in each of three instances has told not a single tale; his role is limited to that of audience. While the stories are being told, the king is under the power of the storyteller, whether that person be a barber, a young lady of Baghdad, or a queen. Thus the traditional hierarchy is turned on its head during the performance event. When the narration has ended, the king resumes his all-powerful role, but perhaps recognizing that he has recently been deposed, albeit temporarily, by the storyteller, he appropriates the stories, has them written down under his own aegis, and therefore once more becomes the master of his kingdom.

This ending to a frame tale, while certainly formulaic, demonstrates the textualization of traditional storytelling that constitutes the genre itself. The medieval recorders and compilers take the vibrance and vitality of the

oral tradition, the very elements that give it power over audiences, and attempt, through the frame tale, to transfer this force to the literary text. Through the process of placing a collection of tales in a portrayal of the oral performance that originally engendered them, the author or compiler retains many of the traditional forms as well. Thus the frame tale, as much if not more than any other medieval genre, depicts through its very existence the constantly fluctuating relationship between traditional and literary narrative in the Middle Ages.

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Affective Criticism, Oral Poetics, and Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon

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I

Affective criticism, as it has been practiced over the last few years, has come to focus upon the reader's (or audience's) subjective experience of a given literary work.¹ Rather than examining the text *qua* object, affective criticism (like all subjective criticism) has abandoned the objectivism and textual reification which lay at the heart of the New Critical enterprise, striving instead to lead "one away from the 'thing itself' in all its solidity to the inchoate impressions of a variable and various reader" (Fish 1980:42).² Shifting the critical focus away from the text to the reader has engendered

¹ Iser, one of the leading proponents of reader-based inquiry, offers the following succinct statement of the logic underlying his and related approaches: "[a]s a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process" (1978:ix). Iser's emphasis on the reader's role and on the constitutive and enabling functions inherent in the act of reading are shared by many other modern theorists despite their radical differences in methodologies, aims, and conclusions. See especially Culler (1982:17-83), and the collections edited by Tompkins (1980) and Suleiman and Crosman (1980).

² The New Criticism has generally warned against inscribing an idiosyncratic, historically and culturally determined reader into a literary text because doing so would lead to subjectivism and ultimately to interpretative chaos. Subjective criticism—criticism which according to Wimsatt and Beardsley "begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism"—poses an especially large threat to the recovery of a text's meaning because "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (1954:21). Further, assigning such importance to the reader's role seriously challenges the New Critical paradigm that established the author as determinant and his or her text as repository of a single, fixed, absolute, and absolutely recoverable meaning (available to those who can properly decode the text).

much controversy, in large part because the emphasis placed upon the reader as sole (or co-)creator of meaning has led to “the exclusion, and even to the avowed extinction, of authors and literary objects” (DeMaria 1978:463).

The debate over the role and function of the reader has been both heated and far-ranging, but for the present purposes it is most important to note that it has yet to be extended in any significant fashion to the vernacular literature produced in England before the Norman Conquest. Peter Travis attributes medievalists’ exclusion from poststructuralist discourse to their “apparent xenophobia” and somewhat archly observes that “[i]t is more than a slight understatement to assert that scholars of medieval English literature have not been centrally engaged in contemporary critical theoretical debate” (1987:201). But while his claim appears to have some substance,³ Travis paints only a partial picture. There is little doubt that a general resistance to what is commonly, if vaguely, referred to simply as “theory” exists among many medievalists,⁴ but their reluctance to enter into contemporary theoretical debates does not wholly explain matters. Despite the appearance of some recent articles and books which apply contemporary theory to Old English texts,⁵ the emphasis of poststructuralist theoretical

³ Green (1990), for example, makes no reference to any aspect of the contemporary debate over the role or function of the reader in his survey of orality and reading in medieval studies. The journal *Speculum* apparently stirred up a large segment of its readership by devoting an entire issue to the question of the so-called New Philology: in a subsequent issue of the *Medieval Academy Newsletter* (November 1990, no. 108), the journal’s editor, Luke Wenger, defended the special issue’s theoretical focus by asserting that “the practitioners of medieval studies cannot and should not stand aloof from the critical and theoretical and political debates that have a prominent place in contemporary academic discourse” (1, 3).

⁴ A case in point is the recent discussion of modern theory and its applicability to Old English literature that was carried on under the derisive heading “Derri-la-de-da” on ANSAX-L, an electronic network of Anglo-Saxonists, during the spring and early summer of 1991. This discussion is preserved in the ANSAX-L archives, ANSAXDAT. See Conner 1993 for more information on gaining access to this electronic discussion group. For a general consideration of contemporary theory’s applicability to medieval literatures, see Patterson 1990; Frantzen 1991a; and Finke and Shichtman 1987.

⁵ For recent books on Old English literature that have a strongly theoretical focus, see among others, Lerer 1991; Overing 1990; Gellrich 1985; and Hermann 1989. Recent articles in this vein include Irvine 1986; Parks 1991; and a number of the essays included in

discourse remains squarely on post-Conquest texts: indeed, those most actively engaged in contemporary theoretical debates rarely, if ever, extend their theories to English literature composed before the fifteenth century. As a way of illustrating this general pattern, Lee Patterson cites Stephen Greenblatt's admission that what he proposes to examine in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* "does not suddenly spring up from nowhere when 1499 becomes 1500" (cited in Patterson 1990:99). For Patterson, Greenblatt's acknowledgment is disturbing because it constitutes "less a recognition of historicity than its suppression, a gesture toward a terra incognita whose experience is acknowledged but whose terrain can be allowed to remain unexplored" (*idem*).

Medieval literature, Patterson suggests, does not figure prominently in contemporary critical debate because "[m]ost literary scholars and critics consider medieval texts to be utterly extraneous to their own interests, as at best irrelevant, at worst inconsequential; and they perceive the field itself as a site of pedantry and antiquarianism, a place to escape from the demands of modern intellectual life" (87). Although evidence supporting this view can be easily adduced, I will offer only the following two examples: Wolfgang Iser, an important figure in the development of reader-based theory, dismisses much of the literature of the Middle Ages as "trivial" because it is "affirmative" (1978:77)⁶ and Jane P. Tompkins tellingly relegates the medieval period to a blank spot on her page as she passes silently from the classical era to the Renaissance while discussing the history of "what literary response was or could be" (1980:206).⁷

Such treatment (or more precisely non-treatment) may well reflect the more general marginalization of medieval studies within the larger discipline as a whole,⁸ but in many ways the neglect of early English literature by contemporary reader-oriented theorists and the resistance to theory in many quarters of medieval studies are difficult to explain both

Frantzen 1991a.

⁶ Mailloux (1982:44-47) discusses this aspect of Iser's theory more fully.

⁷ In discussing this essay in *On Deconstruction*, Culler similarly passes silently over the Middle Ages (1982:39). Suleiman (1980) does touch briefly on the medieval period in her discussion of Hans Robert Jauss's contributions to the field, but her comments are at best cursory. Frantzen has recently considered this question at considerable length (1990 and 1991b).

⁸ See Patterson 1990 for an important discussion of this issue.

because “affective criticism ... [is] explicitly inscribed in the strategies of various kinds of medieval literature” (Travis 1987:202) and because it has historically occupied an important position in medieval literary criticism.⁹ To cite just two well known examples, R.M. Lumiansky (1952) argues that the reactions of the “implied, fictional audience” (Lerer 1991:22) in *Beowulf* are central to the poem’s narrative design because they channel and direct the actual audience’s reception of it, and Arthur Brodeur’s more extended consideration of the poem’s affective dynamics (1959) reveals the active reader’s crucial role.

Although he never employs the term “affective” and although his criticism reinforces rather than challenges basic New Critical tenets, Brodeur’s sensitivity to the reader, if not his aim, is in many ways consonant with contemporary affective criticism. The distance between Brodeur’s approach and Fish’s investigation of the “precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, [and] the following and making of logical sequences” (Fish 1980:43) appears very short indeed. The readily acknowledged subjectivism of the latter replaces the objectivism striven for by the former, but the heuristic impulse underlying these (seemingly) varied critical approaches remains remarkably similar.

As Patterson suggests, the reasons medieval literature has been largely overlooked in contemporary critical discourse are complex, but were contemporary affective critics to glance back towards the Middle Ages, they would discover in the “textuality” of oral and oral-derived¹⁰ poetry the very fluidity and instability that they posit (with much continuing controversy) for contemporary written texts. Throughout much of the medieval period, the concept of a fixed, inviolable “text” is simply not applicable; literature, whether produced orally or in writing, was experienced for the most part aurally.¹¹ Furthermore, an orally composed and transmitted text is especially resistant to reification: “exist[ing] only as a synecdoche of the song” (Foley 1987:197), it does not claim authority in the way that written texts are often believed to. Because the poet is not marked by absence (as is

⁹ See further Renoir 1988:7-47.

¹⁰ For a recent and important discussion of this term, see Foley 1991:1-16.

¹¹ Cf. Crosby 1936, 1938.

true for the literate poet) but by his or her immediate physical presence, the poem can have no independent existence—indeed, without the poet there is no poem. The “object” that he or she produces enjoys only the most ephemeral and temporally circumscribed existence because it is, as Chaucer’s eagle comments, “In his substaunce ...but air”¹²—residing only within the collective memory of those present while it was performed, it leaves behind no trace once the final reverberations of the poet’s voice die out. And finally, because it is always necessarily composed under the exigencies of public performance, the oral text is truly dynamic and highly protean.¹³

By their very natures, oral and oral-derived poetry appear to be particularly well suited to contemporary affective criticism: in the most absolute sense, oral literature is *in* both the hearer and author, and because oral texts have virtually no existence independent of their reception, their audiences truly serve as dynamic co-creators of the texts. In their reception of the text, the audience “*perform[s]* the text, translating from metonym to Gestalt, ... [and] re-mak[es] the work of art” (Foley 1987:196). The processes involved in thus actively (co-)creating the text appear remarkably similar whether it is reconstructed from a static, fixed source (a printed text) or (re-)performed from a fluid, protean one (an oral text).

Yet despite this fundamental similarity, contemporary reader-based theory has yet to embrace medieval literature. To some extent, the marginalization of medieval studies may account for this phenomenon, but another important reason may be that the phrase “affective criticism” is seen to denote two widely divergent critical endeavors rather than marking two distinct points along the same critical continuum. Accordingly, medievalists such as Lumiansky and Brodeur, who consider the “tears, prickles or other physiological symptoms” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954:34) that an Old English poem may elicit, are seen to affiliate themselves with “the ancient rhetorical tradition” that viewed “literature ... as existing primarily in order to produce results and not as an end in itself” (Tompkins 1980:204), while contemporary critics, in contrast, are seen to focus on “the meaning of the text” and not on “the behavior of the

¹² *House of Fame*, line 768; cited from Benson 1987:357.

¹³ As the late Albert B. Lord demonstrated, performances of the same poem by the same oral poet on successive occasions are marked by lexical and narrative variation; see further Lord 1960 and Foley 1990.

audience” (*ibid.*:205). Further, contemporary affective critics treat “the reader’s encounter with literature as an experience of interpretation” (Culler 1982:40), ignoring the effects that literature may have on its audience.

The distinction that Tompkins draws is valid—as Jonathan Culler observes, describing a poem’s impact upon its audience “is not ... to give what we would today regard as an interpretation” (1982:39)—but it is not absolute. The affective criticism applied to medieval literature need not be solely descriptive; a glance at the work of Alain Renoir or John Miles Foley reveals that the hermeneutics that informs their scholarship encompasses both the affective, subjective responses (the tears, prickles, etc.) that the New Critics warned against as well as such “cognitive” responses as “having one’s expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions on which one had relied” (Culler 1982:39), experiences that are the primary focus of poststructuralist affective inquiry. As we will see in the second part of this essay, the oral poetics that structures Beowulf’s fight with the dragon and that elicits such strong affective responses (in Culler’s sense of the term) leads directly to the types of cognitive responses Culler isolates. In other words, the traditional structure of the dragon fight provides both the “foundation on which the aesthetic experience takes shape and the perceptual grid through which it is transmitted” (Foley 1991a:51). Rather than asserting with Tompkins that “[d]espite initial appearances, the ‘affective’ criticism practiced by critics in the second half of the twentieth century owes nothing to the ancient rhetorical tradition” (1980:202), we should note that their chief difference appears to be methodological: the branch of affective criticism informed by oral poetics proceeds from a recoverable structuralist foundation while the one that dominates contemporary reader-based theory removes itself from any structuralist ties.

The linguistic and cultural alterity of Old English literature further contributes to its exclusion from contemporary affective criticism. Chaucer’s poetry has been the focus of some important recent theoretical studies in large part because its essential modernity makes it an apt locus for such investigations,¹⁴ a point Travis neatly (if perhaps unintentionally) articulates (1987:205): “[o]ne reason Chaucer’s poetry is so patently open to reader-response criticism is that it is highly conscious of itself as linguistic artifice and of its readers’ role as coconspirator in the art of

¹⁴ See, for example, Patterson 1991; Dinshaw 1989; Travis 1987; and Lerer 1993.

making fiction.” Chaucer’s poetry, in other words, is for its era unusually self-reflexive.” But in pointing to these “unusual”—one is tempted to read “modern”—characteristics of Chaucer’s work, Travis does not raise the crucial question of whether or not contemporary affective criticism can speak in any meaningful fashion to that medieval literature which does not evidence modern characteristics. The ineluctably traditional nature of Old English poetry and the central role that tradition plays in shaping its reception contribute significantly to this problem,¹⁵ as does the fact that the medieval recipient of literature differs sharply from the Renaissance reader that affective stylistics initially constructed, as well as from the contemporary readers we cannot help but be.¹⁶

As the work of oral theorists has revealed,¹⁷ Old English oral-derived poetic texts have a resonant traditional dimension: the oral poetics that underlies this poetry functions through lexical, thematic, and narrative encodings that shape the text and perhaps even enable the audience’s response.¹⁸ In providing poets with ready access to compositional devices as small as a single word or as large as a narrative pattern that metonymically summon “conventional connotations to conventional structures” (Foley 1991a:8) and “*pars pro toto*” the entire tradition upon which the poetry is predicated to an immediate narrative moment,

¹⁵ For a medievalist such as D.W. Robertson, the need to preserve the cultural wholeness (and hence alterity) of the Middle Ages from what he apparently sees as “the historical imperialism of modern readers,” to borrow Dinshaw’s trenchant phrase (1989:32), is paramount. Robertson succinctly makes the case for his view when he argues that “if we are to compose valid criticism of works produced in earlier stylistic periods, we must do so in terms of conventions established at a time contemporary with the works themselves. If we fail to do so, we shall miss the integrity of the works we study, not to mention their significance, frequently profound, for their original audience” (1980:82).

¹⁶ Such differences can also be found within the medieval period itself. As Lerer has recently argued, fifteenth-century “scribal manipulations” of Chaucer’s texts are important indicators of the different “critical presuppositions and literary tastes” (1988:311) Chaucer’s fifteenth-century readers brought to bear on his poetry. See further Lerer 1990 and espec. 1993.

¹⁷ See Olsen 1986 and 1988 for an excellent survey of the many significant contributions made by oral-formulaicists.

¹⁸ See Foley 1990 for the most detailed discussion to date of the mechanics of the oral tradition and Foley (espec. 1991a) for an illuminating and provocative discussion of the aesthetics of oral and oral-derived poetry.

traditional oral poetics differs most sharply from the literate poetics posited by contemporary affective criticism. That a text may contain some sort of controlling structure that must first be uncovered before proceeding with the business of interpretation simply does not accord with the highly subjective endeavor that is contemporary affective criticism: indeed, the extraordinary variety of responses post-medieval texts engender has been taken as proof positive that they contain no “formal encoding” for “executing interpretive strategies” (Fish 1980:173). Accordingly, the affective dynamics of such texts depends solely upon the idiosyncrasies of those who in reading them, write them. Foley, in distinguishing between the “conferred” meaning of a literate text and the “inherent” meaning of a traditional text, offers a subtle but important corrective to this view. In literary texts, he explains, “the author (not a tradition) *confers* meaning on his or her creation ... and is responsible not only for what the text encodes, but also how the encoding takes place” (1991a:8). Acknowledging that authors encode their works does not threaten the privileged position of the reader; readers will still (necessarily) rewrite the texts that “their interpretive strategies demand and call into being” (Fish 1980:171), but texts created outside a strong, controlling tradition will contain highly idiosyncratic codes and will, not surprisingly, give rise to highly idiosyncratic responses.¹⁹ The “inherent” meaning of an oral traditional text depends, in contrast, “primarily on elements and strategies that were in place long before the execution of the present version or text, long before the present nominal author learned the inherited craft” (Foley 1991a:8). The reception of a text composed within a literate poetics mirrors the text’s production in that both are private and highly idiosyncratic acts. The reception of an oral traditional text—and here it matters little whether we are considering its intended audience’s aural reception or the ocular reception of contemporary readers who have attempted to steep themselves in the tradition—is far different because “the present performance text is always half-immersed in and enriched by a world of resonance that is generally outside the experience of readers who are not acculturated to that tradition” (Parks 1994:157). The traditional narrative structures so important to the composition of oral traditional texts may serve to guide

¹⁹ See further Fish’s comments on the nature and function of what he labels “interpretive communities” (1980:171-73) and Stock’s notion of “textual communities” (1983:88-240).

(or, more extremely, determine) response, but they in no way shackle us to a certain interpretation or point to some sort of objective, monolithic, and ultimately recoverable meaning: examining a text's oral poetics will reveal *how* that text means without in any way delimiting *what* it means.

In what follows, I will attempt to illuminate the position sketched above by arguing that the dragon episode in *Beowulf* possesses a significant, resonant, and largely overlooked oral traditional dimension that can only be recovered by reading the narrative from the inside out;²⁰ given the highly metonymic nature of oral and oral-derived poetry, considering the microstructure of the situation-specific narrative (the *pars* in Foley's terms) will enable us to glimpse the macrostructure of the tradition (the *toto*) that underlies and (in)forms the episode as a whole. The narrative structures that form the core of the following discussion and the narrative techniques upon which they depend can be appreciated by ear or eye—otherwise at this great remove from the English oral tradition modern scholars would never be able to uncover them—but we need to keep in mind that when “we ‘read’ or interpret any traditional performance or text with attention to the metonymic meaning it necessarily summons, we are, in effect, recontextualizing that work, bridging Iserian ‘gaps of indeterminacy’ . . . , reaffirming contiguity with other performances or texts, or, better, with the ever-immanent tradition itself” (Foley 1991b:43). By coupling affective criticism's focus upon the active recipient's response with oral theory's attention to the tradition that (in)forms medieval English oral and oral-derived poetry, I hope to recontextualize *Beowulf*'s fight with the dragon within its “ever-immanent tradition” and thus enable us to hear once again its traditional resonance. My internally focused discussion of *Beowulf* will be supplemented and necessarily balanced by an external comparison with the late twelfth-century *Brut* that seems to confirm the dragon episode's oral traditional foundation and in so doing also sheds important light on the continued influence of oral poetics in post-Conquest England.

²⁰ Without entering into the controversy that still attends the matter of *Beowulf*'s genesis, I should note that I consider the poem to be oral-derived. A detailed discussion of oral and literate poetics in post-Conquest England, the main points of which apply equally well to Anglo-Saxon England, can be found in Amodio 1994.

II

The dragon episode in *Beowulf* occupies fully the final third of the poem and has been described as the “loftiest and most magnificent [section] of the poem” (Niles 1979:927). While serving as the locus for a great many critical studies,²¹ its traditional dimension (its “traditional referentiality” in Foley’s terms) has remained almost entirely unnoticed.²² Its diction and lexicon place this episode squarely within the tradition of Old English oral-derived poetry,²³ but its narrative singularity has effectively obscured the equally traditional nature of its story-pattern.²⁴

Foley has recently opened a window onto this problem by uncovering some important structural similarities among the poem’s three monster fights that have led him to posit that all three fights conform to a story-pattern that he labels “the Battle with the Monster.” The chief constituent motifs of this pattern are “Arming, a *Beot* (or verbal contract), the monster’s Approach, the Death of a Substitute, and the Engagement itself” (1991a:233). While the three monstrous encounters that constitute *Beowulf*’s narrative spine undoubtedly follow the pattern Foley outlines, the dragon fight’s affective dynamics and narrative resonance distance it from the fights against Grendel and Grendel’s mother and suggest that it results from a discrete narrative pattern. The first evidence of the dragon fight’s distinct story-pattern emerges from a consideration of the large narrative contexts within which each of the fights occurs.

Beowulf’s fights with Grendel and Grendel’s mother are firmly grounded within the carefully circumscribed feud ethos so central to the

²¹ The literature devoted to the dragon fight either directly or indirectly is far too voluminous to list. Of particular note are Tolkien 1936; Gang 1952; Bonjour 1953; Rogers 1955; DuBois 1957; Sisam 1958; Chadwick 1959; Leyerle 1965; Scheps 1974-75; Niles 1979; Brown 1980; and Tripp 1983.

²² While complementing Foley’s work on the dragon fight, the present study argues that it possesses a greater structural integrity and traditional weight than he assigns it.

²³ See Foley 1991a:234-35.

²⁴ Chambers long ago remarked that “of all the innumerable dragon-stories extant, there is probably not one which we can declare to be really identical with that of *Beowulf*” (1959:97).

poem and perhaps to early Germanic life.²⁵ From the outset, Grendel's actions against the Danes are viewed as violations of the Christian and social ethos with which the poem's audience were familiar. His monstrous ancestry, his unexplained hatred of the joyful human sounds emanating from the hall, and his refusal to settle blood feuds in the socially prescribed manner by paying *wergild* all fix Grendel as an outcast from the society of God and man from the moment we first see him. As a descendant of Cain, he is by birth opposed to the Christian God who orders the Anglo-Saxon world and as a monster he is by definition exiled from and opposed to the world of *humanitas*.²⁶

The feud ethos also serves to contextualize the actions of Grendel's mother: her seizing of only one man coupled with what may be her conscious and symbolic placing of his head on the "enge anpaðas" ['narrow passes'] (1410a) leading to her mere strongly indicate that she attacks Heorot to avenge her son's death, a point the poet makes explicit.²⁷ Through her actions she shifts the terms of the feud and further aligns them with human actions: what had before been broadly construed as a feud between humans and non-humans suddenly takes on a wholly human character in her desire to gain vengeance and restitution for the life of her (monstrous) son: she "wolde hyre mæg wrecan / gē feor hafað fæhðe gestæled" ['would avenge her kinsman and has carried far the feud'] (1339b-40). Her attack seems more akin to a duty-bound and socially circumscribed attempt to redress the injury done her son than an instinctual and uncontrolled outburst. For both of Beowulf's fights in Denmark, the threats posed to Danish society and the course of the hero's response are mapped out and reaffirmed through contextual signals: the terms of the feuds are clear and familiar.

In sharp contrast to the two monster fights that precede it, the dragon fight, because it lacks the Christian and social dimensions that help to

²⁵ Cf. Byock 1982 and, more recently, Miller 1983a, 1983b, and 1989. See also Kahrl 1972 on the feud in *Beowulf*.

²⁶ See Irving 1989:100-101. On the theme of exile, see Greenfield 1955. The Grendel episode, because it fits the narrative pattern of the frequently occurring and well documented theme of the hero-on-the-beach, is further grounded for the audience. For more on this theme, see especially Crowne 1960; Fry 1966 and 1967; and Renoir 1964.

²⁷ I cite Klaeber's (1950) edition of *Beowulf* throughout. Translations from *Beowulf* are mine, unless otherwise noted.

situate the fights in Denmark, thrusts us onto decidedly difficult ground. That some sort of feud is at its heart is clear, as are the roles and affiliations of the participants in it; but this feud, because it is predicated upon a theft, orients the audience neither sharply nor unproblematically. That someone enters the dragon's barrow and removes a cup is beyond dispute, but the significance of this theft remains clouded and the text offers little clarification of the thief's shadowy nature or motivation: as Theodore M. Andersson remarks, "[t]here is not enough evidence in the *Beowulf* text to reveal the details of the thief's prehistory or his status" (1984:496). The poor state of folio 179r contributes mightily to the problem of the so-called thief's status because all that can be read of the word variously emended to *þegn*, *þeow*, or, as Andersson suggests, *þeof* is its initial *þ*. But even if this philological crux were to be indisputably settled, the larger issue of securely contextualizing this act of thievery would remain.

In his study, Andersson turns with duly noted caution to Old Norse analogues as a means of explicating the theft in *Beowulf*, in large part because theft plays a surprisingly small role in the extant Old English poetry.²⁸ Bessinger and Smith 1978 lists only six occurrences of *þeof*²⁹ and these occur in five poems.³⁰ Further, none of these provide any significant parallels to *Beowulf*. Although the small size of the poetic corpus and our inability to know what has been irrecoverably lost will inevitably undermine any sort of statistical argument, the relative infrequency and demonstrable narrative marginality of thefts in Old English poetry suggest that unlike the attacks of Grendel and his mother, both of which occur within readily apprehensible frameworks, the dragon fight is from its outset not securely contextualized for the audience. When Grendel and then his mother attack Heorot, the context for their actions is known and familiar: it provides a framework for the whole host of expectations activated by their actions. Because the significance of the theft, the precise status of the one

²⁸ Interestingly, Andersson notes that Old Norse poetry similarly contains few instances of theft and comments that "[t]he *Poetic Edda* provides only two occurrences of *þjófr*" (1984:496).

²⁹ This count does not include Andersson's proposed emendation, as the Krapp-Dobbie edition, the basis for the concordance, reads *þ(eow)* at 2223b.

³⁰ The poems in which *þeof* occurs are: *Christ* (twice), *Riddle 47*, *Riddle 73*, *Maxims II*, and *Beowulf* (once each).

who takes the cup, the nature of the theft,³¹ and even “the route taken by the cup” (Andersson 1984:494) remain notoriously opaque, the dragon episode decenters the audience by evoking an unusual, perhaps non-traditional, context for receiving it.³²

Although the dragon fight’s context fails to provide a clear traditional background against which to read the ensuing narrative, the episode’s oral poetics provides clear signals, or codes (to echo Fish’s terminology), that shape the narrative and direct the audience’s response to it. The dragon’s deliberately vague description, Beowulf’s decision to fight the monster alone, and his sword Naegling’s failure constitute the story-pattern’s most salient elements. The affective signals informing all three of these constituents are highly traditional, and have all been encountered earlier in the text, but only in the dragon fight do they cohere into a tightly knit and powerful whole.

The brief and cryptic description of the dragon—the poet tells us only that it is “grimly terrible in its variegated colors” (*grimlic gry[refah]*, 3041a) and spews flames (2312b)—recalls the earlier description (or to be more precise, non-description) of Grendel. The poet calls the dragon alternately “se gæst,” which here means ‘the enemy,’ ‘the demon,’³³ a term common in the corpus of extant Old English poetry and one applied to human and inhuman foes as well, or “se wyrm,” ‘the serpent,’ another frequently used term. The principle underlying the description of both Grendel and the dragon is the same: because the poet provides little concrete detail, the audience must actively participate in the narrative process (filling in what in Iserian terms would be a significant gap of indeterminacy) by fleshing out the creatures in idiosyncratic and terrifying detail. But the similarity ends here. Grendel undergoes a steady process of familiarization

³¹ On this point see Anderson, who argues that “the intruder was blameless in regard to the manner in which he acquired the dragon’s cup” (1977:153) and Andersson, who suggests that “the removal of a single item does not contravene the laws of treasure trove” (1984:494).

³² Foley sees the dragon episode as forming part of the Battle with Monsters theme, and he would hence, I suspect, argue for a broader contextual basis for the dragon episode than I allow here.

³³ In considering this term, we should note the notorious difficulty of distinguishing *gæst* ‘enemy, demon’ from *giest* ‘guest’ and the possible irony that attends the confusion of these terms. I am indebted to John D. Niles for this insight.

as the narrative progresses; we learn his habits (and thus how to avoid death at his hands), his limitations (he seizes only thirty men at a time), and his unvarying destination and time of arrival (Heorot, on a nightly basis). Further, he lives within some sort of recognizable (if monstrous) society with his mother, who herself lives in a fire-lit hall that contains war gear (*searo*) that may well serve a decorative function. The familiarization of Grendel culminates in the public display of his body parts in Heorot. His mutilated arm is carefully scrutinized and then hung up as the central ornament in the hall, and later his severed head is ceremoniously presented to Hrothgar by Beowulf. These ritual displays of the monster's dismembered body reduce what was once an unknowable, undefinable terror to a trophy, a harmless curiosity that may elicit wonder and awe but that has been stripped of its power to terrify.³⁴

The dragon, in contrast, remains unknown and unknowable even in death. The Geats are, as Niles observes (1983:24), able to take its measure once it lies dead on the headlands near its barrow, but they make no attempt to assert their community's collective power over the monstrous other by gathering to wonder at it; rather they quickly and unceremoniously dump its carcass into the sea. The failure to reduce the dragon to a trophy may ultimately stem from the truly unfathomable nature of the monster: the dragon remains, even in death, so far outside the realm of human comprehension that the Geats cannot even attempt to bring it within their society.

Just as the dragon episode's context fails to supply an adequate basis for our reception of it, the dragon, through its unfathomable nature and actions, continually decenters the audience. In contrast to Grendel's sharply focused attacks, the dragon attacks widely and indiscriminately: "Ðā se gæst ongan glēdum spīwan, / beorht hofu bænan; byrnelēoma stōd / eldum on andan" (2312-14a) ['then the enemy began to spew flames, to burn bright dwellings; the flame rose up, terrible to men']. That its awful and immeasurable anger is not directed at any specific person or object but is to a large degree random adds greatly to the almost overwhelming air of indeterminacy that attends the dragon. Beowulf's hall is burnt, not because it has a special significance for the attacker, as Heorot does for Grendel, but

³⁴ We are not told what becomes of Grendel's head, but the speculation that it, too, was mounted on Heorot's wall as a trophy may not be entirely unfounded.

simply because it happens to be in the dragon's path.³⁵ The dragon's power cannot easily be measured by human standards and its aim is truly chilling in its scope: it does not just seek control of one hall during the night, but in the countryside surrounding its barrow it “nō ðær aht cwices / ... lǣfan wolde” (2314b-15b) [‘would not leave anything alive there’]. Whereas Grendel mutely and perversely plays at being a *healðegn* (142a) ‘hall-retainer’ and hence invokes an inverted, disturbing but recognizable and ultimately rectifiable paradigm of human power, the dragon remains “implacably dedicated to the obliteration of all history” (Irving 1989:100-01), of all that is human.

Within the dynamics of the dragon episode, Beowulf's *beot* serves to orient the audience by counterbalancing the indeterminacy that marks the scene's beginning.³⁶ In telling his retainers (2532b-35a)

Nis þæt ēower sīð,
nē gemet mannes, nefn(e) mīn ānes,
þæt hē wið āglǣcean eofodō dǣle,
eorlscype efne....

[‘This is not your adventure, nor is it the measure of any man, except mine alone, that he should fight against the awesome one, perform a heroic deed...’],

Beowulf offers a powerful articulation of the poem's familiar heroic ethos.

³⁵ In the course of arguing for the hall's centrality in the poem's metaphors, Irving suggests that Beowulf's hall was, in fact, the target of the dragon's maliciousness: “[h]aving been first deeply penetrated by the human invader, the death-world of the dragon now bulges out in its turn to invade and coil menacingly around the living world outside and to seek to destroy its heart, the most important symbol of social life, the king's hall” (1989:102). Despite this argument's obvious appeal, a random, widely destructive power is more characteristic of what Irving elsewhere in the same study labels the “world of *draconitas*” (101). The opacity of a dragon's thinking and the indeterminacy of its attacks would seem to add greatly to its terrible aspect from the human perspective.

³⁶ The Geatish history that occupies such a large percentage of the poem's final section serves a similar function. In reporting the Swedish-Geatish feuds, the poet attempts—but fails—to make the dragon fight comprehensible to the audience by placing it against the backdrop of human feuds. For a contrasting view, cf. Kahrl (1972), who argues for the structural and thematic equivalence of Beowulf's feud with the dragon and the Swedish-Geatish feuds.

He prefaces the fight with Grendel with a similar remark (242b-26a) and although he does not explicitly make a comparable announcement before fighting Grendel's mother, saying only "ic mē mid Hruntinge / dōm gewyrce" (1490b-91a) ['I will perform glory with Hrunting'], his syntax, in doubly stressing his role through the successive positioning of the first person pronoun and the reflexive (perhaps pleonastic) dative pronoun, subtly and forcefully establishes that he, alone, will venture into the mere.³⁷ The similarities here among these three moments result in part from a shared and very broad affective base: the hero, by setting out on his task alone, magnifies the danger of his undertaking and increases the terror and admiration which the episode elicits in the audience.

But unlike his earlier boasts,³⁸ Beowulf's *beot* in the dragon episode does not align itself neatly along the poem's narrative axis. Indeed, in its immediate narrative context, the announcement that he will fight the dragon alone is most disturbing. His approach to the battle indicates that he clearly perceives the dragon to be a foe unlike any he has ever faced; he carefully arms himself and carries a specially made iron shield instead of the more usual wooden one (2337-41a):

Heht him þā gewyrcean wīgendra hlēo
eallīrenne, eorla dryhten,
wīgbord wrætlic; wisse hē gearwe
þæt him holtwudu he(lpan) ne meahte,
lind wið līge.

['The protector of warriors, the lord of earls, commanded that a wondrous shield all of iron be made; he knew well that forest-wood would not help him, lindenwood against flame.']

Yet immediately following this display of prudence, he paradoxically refuses to allow his men to assist him in what he senses will be his most difficult battle. Were we to view this moment strictly from the microstructural perspective of the poem's narrative, we might be tempted to

³⁷ See further Mitchell 1985:§271-74 on the distinction between "necessary" and "pleonastic" datives. The unrecoverable paralinguistic features of stress and vocalization play important roles in the oral poetics of this scene.

³⁸ On the nature of the *beot* in the second monster fight, see Foley 1991a:234.

cite it as an example of Beowulf's *ignorantia*,³⁹ especially in light of his subsequent fantastic statement that he wishes he could fight the dragon bare-handed as he did Grendel (2518b-21):

Nolde ic sweord beran,
wāpen tō wyrme, gif ic wiste hū
wið ðām āglæcan elles meahte
gylpe wiðgrīpan, swa ic giō wið Grendle dyde....

[‘I would not bear a sword, a weapon against the serpent, if I knew how else I might wrestle against the awesome one to my honor, as I formerly did against Grendel...’]

He immediately offers a reassuringly accurate assessment of the situation—“ic ðær heaðufýres hātes wēne, / [o]rðes ond attres; forðon ic mē on hafu / bord on byrnan” (2522a-24a) [‘there I expect hot battle-fire, breath and poison; therefore I have on me shield and mail-shirt’]—but the inappropriateness of his former statement lingers. At the end of his long and storied life, Beowulf seems to grasp only imperfectly what may well be one of the basic lessons of martial life, namely that “[h]eroic existence is a series of *increasingly difficult* skirmishes in the one long battle” (Irving 1968:217; emphasis mine). Commissioning the metal shield is Beowulf’s sole concession to the dragon’s enormous power and his own advanced age and necessarily diminished physical capacity; in all other regards he behaves as if he were going to face Grendel, Grendel’s mother, or some other foe whose power he is more likely to match.

In identifying the role Beowulf’s *beot* plays within the “Battle with the Monster” story-pattern, Foley touches on an important aspect of the scene’s oral poetics.⁴⁰ But if we are to align fully the episode’s narrative and traditional axes, we need to recognize that the *beot* comprises, along with the failure of Naegling, the very heart of the episode’s affective

³⁹ Kaske (1968) offers a far different reading of this decision. To him, the dragon fight “is a brilliant device for presenting in a single action not only Beowulf’s final display of his kingly *fortitudo*, but also his development and his ultimate preservation of personal and kingly *sapientia*” (24). See also Kaske 1958:297.

⁴⁰ However, Foley does not attempt to account for the dragon episode’s full traditional resonance; his main concern is with demonstrating the traditional structure of the story-pattern he sees underlying it (1991a:232 and note 89).

dynamics. When the greatest hero alive, despite his advanced age and diminished physical capacities, resolves to face alone another severe, monstrous threat to a kingdom, as he had successfully done in his youth, the audience, privileged in their knowledge of the dragon's power and intentions and acutely aware of Beowulf's age and position within the kingdom, find themselves exquisitely suspended between powerful and conflicting emotions. Beowulf's decision increases the audience's fear and admiration exponentially as their desire to have the dragon's threat eradicated clashes with their attachment to and perhaps even identification with Beowulf, especially since the hero's death in the approaching battle has been forecast from the scene's outset.⁴¹

In contrast, the boasts that Beowulf makes in Denmark must be read in light of his youth and relative inexperience, and are, accordingly, far less resonant than his final one. He is a warrior in whom, early on at least, *fortitudo* far outweighs *sapientia*.⁴² He arrives at the Danish court eager to make a name for himself and valiantly (if perhaps foolishly) vows to engage singlehandedly and unarmed the monster that has been ravaging Heorot for the last twelve years.⁴³ Within the context of the first half of the poem, Beowulf's decision to fight Grendel derives unproblematically from the poem's traditional heroic ethos; ridding Denmark of Grendel would certainly enhance the reputation of the fledgling monster-fighter, and destroying the awful "shadow-goer" (*sceadugenga*) unarmed and unassisted would bring him even greater glory. He responds swiftly—almost as a matter of reflex—to the challenge Hrothgar lays at his feet following the

⁴¹ Such forecasts of Beowulf's death do not affect the episode's tension because, as Brodeur argues (1959:89), "[s]uspense can be maintained without withholding all knowledge of an action's outcome until the final moment; it resides in the degree and quality of emotional tension imposed upon the listener in the effective prolongation of the conflict between fear and hope."

⁴² For a fuller discussion of these terms and an important consideration of their role in *Beowulf*, see Kaske 1958.

⁴³ Within the poem, only Unferth voices any concern over Beowulf's past behavior and his announced plan of attack against Grendel. Long a disputed character, Unferth has recently come under reconsideration by Irving (1989:36-47), who persuasively argues against the various received opinions of Hrothgar's *pyle* and suggests that in accusing Beowulf of coming to their aid "for foolish pride" (*for dolgilpe*) and "for arrogance" (*for wlenco*), Unferth simply voices the unarticulated but real doubts of the collected Danes and thus serves as a sort of "Everydane."

attack of Grendel's mother for very similar reasons.⁴⁴ Although it plays a far less significant role in the oral poetics of the story pattern, the desire for fame figures in his final *beot* and supplies an important traditional link with the other boasts.

The failure of his sword Naegling, in contrast, does not appear to fit into any sort of traditional pattern, but rather appears to be the culmination of Beowulf's highly idiosyncratic inability to wield weapons successfully. In a comment meant perhaps to illuminate this striking aspect of Beowulf's character, the *Beowulf*-poet explains that the hero was simply too powerful for man-made weapons (2684b-87):⁴⁵

wæs sīo hond tō strong,
 sē ðe mēca gehwane, mīne gefrāge,
 swenge ofersōhte, þonne hē tō sæcce bær
 wāpen wund[r]um heard; næs him wihte ðē sēl.

[‘the hand was too strong, as I have heard, which with its stroke severely tested every blade, when he bore to battle the weapon hardened by wounds; he was none the better for it.’]

There is no doubt that Beowulf possesses tremendous power. In the course of the narrative we witness him performing several deeds requiring almost superhuman physical ability, performances supplemented by both his own and other reports of his prowess, and he is, by all accounts, a remarkable physical specimen: the Danish coastguard most tellingly remarks to the newly arrived troop of Geats that he “Nǣfre...māran geseah / eorla ofer eorþan ðonne is ēower sum” (247b-48) [‘I never saw a bigger warrior on earth than is a certain one of you’]. But Beowulf's power does not account

⁴⁴ We should perhaps note, however, that his decision to fight Grendel's mother occurs within a somewhat more complex narrative context. In “adopt[ing] or coopt[ing] Beowulf into the new pseudo-Danish role of son and hall-guardian” (Irving 1989:44), Hrothgar situates the Geat within two of Germanic society's most important positions. In Beowulf's careful arming and acceptance of a famous, battle-tested sword we may see a tacit acknowledgment of his new position within and obligation to Danish society. But cf. Leyerle (1965:92), who argues that Beowulf's unreflective answer is “the kind of *beot* warned against in *The Wanderer* (65-72).”

⁴⁵ However, Garbáty sees the hero's strength as underlying several other notable sword failures, and he argues (1962:59) that “[t]he *Beowulf*, then, gives us the earliest stated cause for the broken or fallible sword motif.”

for the troubles he has with weapons and we should, accordingly, not allow it to form the background for Naegling's failure. Against Grendel's mother, her tough hide causes Hrunting, Beowulf's man-made weapon, to fail.⁴⁶ And against the dragon his strength plays, at best, an ancillary role in Naegling's destruction; Beowulf offers a tremendous and dramatic stroke, but the blade fails because he attacks what may well be the dragon's most heavily armored spot, its head. Wiglaf has much more success because he is positioned where he can avoid the creature's head and strike at a more vulnerable (and sword-saving) spot.

In the matter of Naegling's failure, the *Beowulf*-poet's comment that to Beowulf "þæt gifeðe ne wæs / þæt him irenna ecge mihton / helpan æt hilde; wæs sīo hond tō strong" (2682b-84) ['it was not fated that iron edges might help him in battle; (his) hand was too strong'] has been allotted a disproportionate weight. We do see two swords fail in Beowulf's hands, but in each case the extraordinary use to which the man-made weapons were put causes their failure. We can perhaps best gain perspective on Beowulf's strength by recalling that he may be related to Indo-European grip heroes, such as Heracles, who rely chiefly on their own might and not weapons when fighting.⁴⁷ There is nothing in their characters inherently inimical to the successful employment of weapons; the heroes choose to fight unarmed and they will occasionally employ swords.⁴⁸ What is often overlooked in discussions of Beowulf's strength is that it plays a crucial role in all his battles with men and monsters. For example, during his fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf's strength, far from hindering him in any way, enables him to employ the "old giant sword" (*ealdsweord eotenisc*) he discovers in her dwelling (1559b-61):

þæt [wæs] wāpna cyst,—
 būton hit wæs mære ðonne ænig mon oðer
 to beadulace ætberan meahte....

⁴⁶ Although the text is silent on this point, a spell similar to that cast over Grendel (cf. 801b-5a) may help protect her as well; cf. Chance 1986:103. Rogers (1984) argues against the existence of the spell.

⁴⁷ Irving (1989:92-4) emphasizes the narrative importance of Beowulf's hand-grip. See Chambers 1959:62-68 and 365-81 and, more recently, Glosecki 1989:197-210 and Stitt 1992 for discussions of *Beowulf*'s connection to the "Bear's Son" folktale.

⁴⁸ Beowulf himself reports on his past success with his sword at lines 555b-57a.

[‘that was the best of weapons, except that it was bigger than any other man could bear to battle....’]

Similarly, rather than seeing his crushing of Daeghrefn as another example of his inability to use weapons, we should align our reading of this event with Beowulf’s. His dispatching of the Frankish warrior appears to be the second and final time over the course of his long martial career that he is a *handbona*, taking this unique compound, as Beowulf clearly does, in its most literal sense as “slayer with the hand.” In explicitly linking the fights with Grendel and Daeghrefn in this manner, he demonstrates his conviction that they increased his reputation in precisely the same way.

That he singles out his slaying of both Grendel and Daeghrefn as examples of his status as a *handbona* and offers no further examples or any statement that would indicate he habitually destroyed foes in such a manner strongly suggests these were isolated incidents. Indeed, Beowulf, in his assertion that his sword has served him well for many years (2499b-2502), and the poet, in labeling Naegling “iron good from old times” (*īren ārgōd*, 2586a), allude to the sword’s tried and successful past; from both these comments we can infer that Naegling is not, like the sword Chaucer’s Reeve carries, rusty from disuse. Beowulf does state that he wishes he could fight the dragon unarmed (2518 ff. cited above), but we should see this desire as being linked to the exceptional honors that such battles bestowed on him in the past instead of casting it as a (rather oblique) comment on his ability to employ weapons. Reading his remark as even a veiled admission of ineptitude creates at least one enormous problem: given the special status of swords in the poem’s heroic society, an inability to wield weapons would, by definition, exclude the greatest hero of his day from participating in an essential aspect of his heroic society.

We can, I believe, best understand the failure of Naegling by reading it in its affective context and by recognizing that it forms the emotional, if not narrative, climax of both the dragon episode and of the entire poem. As with Beowulf’s decision to fight alone, recognizing the central role that the failure of Naegling plays in the episode’s affective dynamics will permit us to disentangle it from other related moments and to perceive more clearly its traditional structure.

During the course of the dragon fight, Naegling fails not once, but twice. Its initial failure occurs in the first of Beowulf’s three encounters

with the dragon and parallels, narratively and affectively, the failure of Hrunting. Under the mere and against the dragon, the failure of a man-made weapon forces him to confront the boundaries of society's power. Beowulf compensates for society's inability to help him by first stepping momentarily outside of the realm of *humanitas* and then redefining it.⁴⁹ When Hrunting proves ineffectual against Grendel's mother, Beowulf utilizes his extraordinary power and employs the *ealdsweord eotenisc* he discovers hanging on the wall, thereby transcending the human world and entering, however briefly, the mythological world of the giants. Although he tosses the manmade blade away during the battle, when he later returns it to Unferth Beowulf appears to understand that the blade was overtaxed; he does not mention its failure but works to recuperate and reestablish its status by praising it as a *lēoflīc īren* ['precious sword'].

In the first encounter with the dragon, a manmade sword once again proves ineffective when turned against a non-human foe. However, when Naegling initially fails, no external alternative presents itself: Beowulf cannot, as he had earlier done, reach into another world for the assistance that his own society cannot provide. He seems to have arrived at the nadir of his existence; his *comitatus* has deserted him, his shield cannot long withstand the dragon's fierce onslaught, and his sword has proved useless. Once Naegling fails to penetrate the dragon's hide, Beowulf is truly stripped of all but the most elemental resource: his courage. Rather than crossing the border into another, non-human realm, he turns deep inside himself and pushes human courageousness to new heights when he reengages the dragon with a weapon that has just proved useless.

During the second of his three engagements with the dragon, Beowulf advances and strikes at its head with Naegling: "mægenstrengo slōh / hildebille, þæt hyt on heafolan stōd / nīþe genyded" (2678b-80a) ['with mighty force he struck with his battle-blade, so that, driven in a

⁴⁹ It can be argued that this pattern begins with his spurning of society in the fight with Grendel. He first strips himself of society's trappings and then seemingly becomes of a piece with the brutal, bestial, and inarticulate world Grendel occupies. The Beowulf who stands (perhaps naked) covered in blood and gore, mutely clutching the arm and shoulder he has just wrenched off his foe, certainly seems other than human. The difference between his behavior in the Grendel fight and in the other monstrous encounters is that he voluntarily and consciously rejects society from the start of the Grendel episode, whereas in the later fights he initially seeks to exploit the apparent technological advantages that society provides, only to have them fail him.

hostile manner, it stood in (the dragon's) head']. We may well question his tactics here; after all, his sword has just proved inadequate against the dragon's hide, dragons are renowned for possessing tough, bony heads, and the head of this particular poisonous, fire-breathing dragon is trebly fraught with danger.

The audience's emotional investment is at its greatest in the moments preceding Beowulf's second stroke. Having witnessed Naegling's failure and the dragon's power, they are buoyed by the hero's remarkable courage and his implicit resolution to overcome the inhuman threat facing him (and by extension them). But as the blade splinters and the hero's fortunes suddenly and irrevocably change for the worse, the audience's expectations are powerfully undercut. To emphasize the importance of the sword's failure, the poet explicitly states first that "Nægling forbærst" (2680b) ['Naegling burst'] and then immediately that "geswāc æt sæcce sweord Bīowulfes" (2681) ['Beowulf's sword failed in battle'], thus freezing the moment and prolonging its agony. At the very instant the sword fails, the tension and fear central to the episode reach their peak; all the references to Beowulf's doom that have punctuated the scene suddenly acquire an awful and inescapable reality.⁵⁰ In attacking the dragon head on with a useless sword and then finally facing the monster armed only with Naegling's shattered hilt and a "dagger" (*wall-seax*), Beowulf redefines human courage. The model for heroic behavior he offers is not suitable for everyone—Wiglaf, we must recall, chooses to strike the dragon's more vulnerable underbelly—but this in no way diminishes the gloriousness of Beowulf's gesture.⁵¹

III

To support the contention that Beowulf's fight with the dragon relies upon oral poetics, I offer as a comparand a scene from *Lazamon's Brut* that

⁵⁰ See for example the comments at lines 2510-11a and 2423b-24; see further Brodeur 1959:88-106.

⁵¹ Earl, in arguing (1991:85) that "in the last part of the poem, [*Beowulf's*] audience would probably have shifted their identification to Wiglaf, who comes to occupy the position of the faithful retainer," offers a contrasting reading of the dragon fight's affective dynamics.

bears a powerful resemblance to Beowulf's final battle. The outline of the scene is as follows: Morpidus, a hero of truly remarkable strength, goes off by himself to fight an extraordinary monster that has been harrying his country; the hero seeks out the monster and they engage in a protracted battle; during the fight, the hero pierces the monster's head with his sword; the sword breaks off at the hilt and the monster snares the hero in its jaws; at the scene's conclusion, both lie dead. Even from this sketchy outline, the striking narrative similarities of the two episodes emerge clearly. Although the library at Worcester (to which Laȝamon may have had access) appears to have contained a sizable collection of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we must be careful in positing a direct written influence on the *Brut* because, as Daniel Donoghue cautions, "[d]emonstrating that a large body of Old English alliterative verse and prose was available is not proof that Laȝamon read any part of it or used it in shaping his verse" (1990:541-42). The precise axes of this episode's transmission to Laȝamon will never be known, but because the *Brut* is generally agreed to be constructed upon two well known sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, we do have the relatively rare opportunity of observing how a medieval poet handles his sources.⁵²

With his characteristic narrative economy, Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us that

Inter hæc & alia seucie suæ gesta contigit ei infortunium quoddam quod nequitiam suam deleuit. Aduenerat namque ex partibus hibernici maris inaudite feritatis belua. quæ incolas iuxta maritima sine intermissione deuorabat. Cumque fama aures eius attigisset accessit ipse ad illam & solus cum ea congressus est. At cum omnia tela sua in illa in uanum consumpsisset. accelerauit monstrum illud & apertis faucibus ipsum uelut pisciculum deuorauit.

[‘there chanced to come a cruelty to destroy his wickedness and his iniquity; for there came out of the sea of *Iwerddon* a monster whose cruelty could never be satisfied; for wherever he went without rest he devoured man and beast. And when Morydd [Morpidus] heard this, he went out himself to fight it, but it did not prosper him, for when he had used up all his weapons,

⁵² For a more detailed discussion of the *Brut*'s oral poetics, see Amodio 1987:96-263 and 1994:13-21. Le Saux 1989 offers a thorough treatment of the *Brut*'s relationship to its sources.

the monster came upon him and swallowed him alive as a big fish gulps down a little one.’]⁵³

We can see the kernel of *Lazamon’s* account here, especially in the hero’s singlehanded engagement and the failure of his weapons, but neither of these receive significant stress in Geoffrey’s narrative. Wace, whose most immediate source was Geoffrey, offers a similarly compressed treatment of this scene. In his *Roman de Brut*, itself a primary source for the English poem, we discover that a “marine belue” (‘sea beast’)

Par les viles, lez les rivages,
Feseit granz duels e granz damages,
Homes e femes devurout,
E les bestes es champs mangout.⁵⁴

[‘Throughout the towns, along the shores,
It caused great suffering and great harm—
It devoured men and women
And ate the animals in the fields.’]

Morpidus learns of the beast’s ravagings and journeys to meet it alone (3436) with the same outcome as in the *Brut*: “Mort fu li reis” (3451) [‘the king was dead’] and “la beste si tost morut” (3461) [‘the beast had died quickly’].

By way of contrast, in the *Brut*, Morpidus’ engagement with the monster is much more fully developed:⁵⁵ in addition to the narrative details outlined above, we learn that Morpidus is “monnene strengest / of maine and of þeauwe; of alle þissere þeode” (3170-71) [‘the strongest of men of might and of thews of all this people’], that he had an unpromising birth, that he has killed seven hundred men in one battle, and that he periodically falls

⁵³ Both the Latin text of Geoffrey’s *Historia* and its English translation are from Griscom’s edition (1929:295).

⁵⁴ I cite the *Roman de Brut* from Arnold’s edition (1938:ll. 3425-28). I am indebted to Christine Reno for her help with translating Wace.

⁵⁵ Ringbom (1968:105) notes that the section in the English poem that contains the Morpidus episode shows an 84.6% increase in the number of lines over Wace’s treatment of the same material.

victim to a murderous rage (3174-77).⁵⁶ The beast is described only elliptically as “a deor swiðe sellich” (3209) [‘a very marvelous beast’], leaving us to infer its size by its killing power (3212). These and other obvious points of contact between *Beowulf* and the *Brut* point to this episode’s deep and rich oral traditional structure, the core of which emerges most clearly when we examine the affective dynamics of Morpidus’ decision to fight the monster alone and his weapons’ subsequent failure against the beast.

Just as Beowulf excuses his *comitatus* from the dragon fight, so too Morpidus commands “al his hird-folc; faren to are burze. / and hæhte heom þer abiden” (3222-23) [‘all his people to go to a town and to wait there’]. Despite the important distinctions between ordering a trained group of select warriors to remove themselves from an imminent battle and telling one’s subjects to protect themselves by remaining at a safe distance, the affective principle underlying both these actions remains the same: the hero substantially increases the risk at hand by undertaking the fight alone. After counseling his people to keep themselves safely removed, Morpidus, we are told “ane . . . gon riden” (3223) [‘alone . . . he began to ride’]. A similar stress on the hero’s isolation is also found on several occasions in *Beowulf*, most notably when the Geat announces to his *comitatus* (2532-34) that

Nis þæt ēower sīð,
nē gemet mannes, nefn(e) mīn ānes,
þæt hē wið āglæcean eofodo dæle....

[‘This is not your adventure, nor is it the measure of any man, except mine alone, that he should fight against the awesome one...’].

moments before calling the dragon forth from its cave. When we fit the phrase “and ane he gon riden” into its larger narrative context by recalling that Morpidus is a king, that he is the strongest of men alive, and that he faces a powerful, monstrous, indeterminate foe, the full metonymic force and traditional referentiality of *ane* come into play.

The failure of Morpidus’ weapons sheds perhaps the most light on the oral poetics that informs the episode. In preparing to fight the beast, Morpidus assembles a rather impressive array of weapons (3225-27):

⁵⁶ I cite the *Brut* from Brook and Leslie’s edition (1963-78) throughout. Translations from the *Brut* are mine unless otherwise noted.

. . . a kene sweord; and enne koker fulne flan.
 enne boʒe swiðe strong; and a spere swiðe long.
 æt his sadele an æx; and æt þe oðer hælue an hond-sæx.

[a sharp sword and a quiver full of arrows, a very strong bow and a very long spear; at his saddle an ax and on the other side a dagger.]

Of these, the *æx* and the *hond-sæx*, despite recalling Beowulf's *wæll-seax*, play no part in the narrative; the bow, spear, and sword, however, are all employed during the fight and, most significantly, they all are destroyed. The spear splinters when it strikes the beast's tough hide, and in a moment sharply reminiscent of *Beowulf*, Morpιδus' sword shatters against the beast's skull (3241-43):

And þe king droh his sweord; þe him wes itase.
 and þet deor he smat a-nan; uppe þat hæued-bæn.
 þat þet sweord in deæf; and þe hilt on his hand bræc.

[And the king drew his sword when he was ready and struck that beast at once upon the head-bone so that the sword sunk in and the hilt broke in his hand.]

Just as in Beowulf's fight with the dragon, the affective stylistics of this episode depend heavily upon the dramatic destruction of the hero's weapons and each failure carries with it a deep metonymic resonance.⁵⁷

Of the three failures, that of his bow is most striking because it is not logically grounded; the spear and sword break when he employs them, but we learn simply and rather inexplicably that "Þa his flæn weoren iscoten; þa iwærd his boʒe to-broken" (3234). Donald G. Bzdyl, in his recent prose translation of the poem, renders this as "When the arrows were shot, the bow was broken" (1989:86) and thus captures only very loosely the sense of *iward* and *tobroken*. Frederic Madden's more literal translation preserves much more faithfully, if far less elegantly, both the sense of ME *wurþen* (<OE *weorþan*), "to become, to happen" and the intensive force of the

⁵⁷ A narrative imperative also informs these failures: the destruction of the spear and bow, weapons that are used from afar, forces the hero into close quarters with the beast.

verbal prefix *to-*:⁵⁸ “When his arrows were shot, then became his bow broken in pieces” (1847:I, 276). The impersonal force of *wurpen* is particularly important here because the poet ascribes no agency to Morpιδus for this action.⁵⁹ He does not break his bow out of anger or frustration when the arrows do not have their desired effect; the bow simply and spontaneously shatters.

Viewed from the perspective of a literate poetics, this moment bespeaks a serious artistic and narrative breakdown since bows do not tend to self-destruct. But in its very defiance of narrative logic, the bow’s shattering emphatically demonstrates the power of the oral poetics working in this scene. Even though Laζamon’s handling of the destruction of the hero’s weapon is in this instance illogical and inelegant, his spartan treatment allows us to see all the more clearly the affective dynamics that underlies the entire episode. Put simply, to achieve the affective level it does, this episode depends upon the failure of the hero’s weapon(s). Recalling the importance of such a failure to the episode’s oral poetics clarifies the function of this seemingly odd narrative moment: just as Naegling’s initial failure in the dragon episode prefigures its ultimate destruction (and the hero’s death), the destruction of Morpιδus’ bow heightens the episode’s tension and joins with the other failures to betoken the hero’s imminent death. Although it lacks the emotional intensity and narrative resonance that Beowulf’s fight with the dragon possesses, Morpιδus’ final battle is clearly constructed along similar lines.

IV

The approach sketched in the preceding pages derives from two seemingly contradictory critical practices. On the one hand, it depends upon the affective, largely subjective hermeneutics—central to much contemporary literary theory—that emphasizes the powerful role idiosyncratic readers play in forming literature. On the other hand, it relies heavily upon a structural, oral poetics that, because it contains inherent and consistent codes, would seem to inhibit the range and type of admissible

⁵⁸ On ME *wurpen* (<OE *weorpan*), see Mustanoja 1960:615-16 and Mitchell 1985:I, 267-68. On the intensive force of the verbal prefix *to-*, see Brinton 1988:206-7.

⁵⁹ See further Mitchell 1985:I, 435-36.

responses. But the paradox is more perceived than real: uncovering the role oral poetics plays in shaping the text reveals *how* the text means while leaving the interestingly vexed question of *what* it means completely and necessarily open. We can, and will, continue to dispute just what *Beowulf*, or any other text, means, but in acknowledging the oral traditional underpinnings of medieval oral-derived poetry we can begin to see more clearly both how the texts work and how those who receive them figure as their (co-)creators.⁶⁰

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Mandela Comes Home: The Poets' Perspective

Russell H. Kaschula

Introduction

The oral poet, or *imbongi* (pl. *iimbongi*), still forms an important part of contemporary Xhosa oral traditions. Although society is continually adapting due to changing socioeconomic and political norms in South Africa, the Xhosa *imbongi* has been absorbed into present-day life. The role of the modern *imbongi* is therefore inextricably linked to the ever changing social norms and values in Xhosa society.¹

Political oratory takes place within the wider social, political, and cultural context (the macro situation) of a particular society; this is also true of the *imbongi*'s poetry today. For example, with the reawakening of Black Nationalism and political consciousness among the Xhosas, poetry in the form of *izibongo* is alive and well within trade unions and political organizations. Thus any ethnographic study of *iimbongi* as political orators and social critics would have to take place within the broader social and cultural context. Such studies would, in turn, possibly reveal changes within society. The micro or immediate context of any performance, and the macro situation, including the broader South African context, within which the *imbongi* operates, are interlinked. This approach clearly illustrates that oral tradition has, in this case, adapted itself to become a vehicle of protest in contemporary South African society.

The Voice of Protest in Oral and Written Poetry

In an article entitled "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary South African Community," A. Mafeje defines the *imbongi* as someone who lived in close proximity to the Chief's Great Place and who accompanied the

¹ See especially Kaschula 1991, on which the present essay is based.

Chief on important occasions (1967:193). His performances² would be directed at the Chief, decrying what was unworthy, praising what was worthy and even forecasting what was going to happen.³ Clearly, the *imbongi's* role was one that allowed for criticism—hence the voice of protest in Xhosa oral poetry. This voice of protest, according to Ewels (1981:12), “is implicit in the role of the bard in traditional and contemporary society.” Being only one aspect of the poetic tradition, it nevertheless forms an important and vital part of Xhosa oral poetry.

The *imbongi's* right to speak freely, with impunity, has been seriously threatened over the last decade in Transkei. The voice of protest that is characteristic of Xhosa *izibongo* has often been severely censored in order to serve the ends of petty politicians, thereby undermining the credibility of the *imbongi*. Jeff Opland provides an example (1983:266-67) of how Qangule, a well-known *imbongi* in Transkei, was arrested because of his opposition to the way in which the late Chief Sabata Dalindyebo, Paramount Chief of the Thembus, was detained and later deposed. Qangule's poetry was highly critical of the ruling Matanzima regime. Likewise, Mafeje quotes the case of Mr. Melikhaya Mbutuma, who was often harassed by the police prior to Transkei independence because of his pro-Dalindyebo stand and his opposition to independence often expressed in his poetry. However, the voice of protest still remains, and is especially clear within the Mass Democratic Movement. In line with the main topic of this article, namely Mandela's visit home, the voice of protest within contemporary poetry will be outlined.

The contemporary bard continues to act as a social and political commentator. Of course, the socioeconomic and political environment has changed dramatically over the last couple of years in southern Africa. It is therefore safe to assume that these changes have also had some effect on the role of the *imbongi* in contemporary society. Indeed, it is probably the first time that *iimbongi* are producing oral poetry about Mandela in his presence. As J. Cronin observes of contemporary poetry in general (1989:35),

² The *imbongi* is normally male.

³ There are different kinds of *iimbongi*. The *imbongi* attached to chiefs presents only one category. For example, *izibongo* can be produced about nature and other subjects. The *izibongo* produced about chiefs, however, are often regarded as the most complex.

we must contextualise it within the rolling wave of semi-insurrectionary uprisings, mass stayaways, political strikes, consumer boycotts, huge political funerals, factory occupations, rent boycotts, school and university boycotts, mass rallies, and physical confrontation over barricades with security forces.

The *imbongi* has also, for example, been absorbed into trade unions that represent the interests of workers in the society. The reawakening of Black nationalism and political consciousness among Africans, and the greater need for recognition within the work place (including equal opportunity and remuneration) have resulted in poetry in the form of traditional *izibongo* being produced within the Congress of South African Trade unions. In fact, it is not uncommon for an *imbongi* to produce poetry at a union meeting.

The voice of protest is also entrenched in written poetry. It can be heard, for example, in the writing of Sepamla, Mphahlele, Themba, and others. After the 1976 uprising there was a flood of protest poetry. It is interesting to note that although much of this poetry was, and still is, produced in English, it makes use of traditional styles and techniques. This phenomenon of resorting to English can probably be ascribed to the frustration of the writers in their attempts to reach their oppressors, namely the whites, the majority of whom are unable to understand an African language. English is also an international language, hence affording an author access to a much wider audience.

The voice of protest therefore speaks out in both written and oral poetry produced in a variety of African languages as well as in English. It is also interesting to note that oral, as opposed to written poetry, is now also produced in English, but that it clearly draws on traditional roots. Perhaps the best example of such a performer is Mzwakhe Mbuli, known as “The People’s Poet.” The mass rally that was held in Umtata on April 22, 1990 also saw oral performances in English.

Mandela Poetry: Contextual Setting

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, the President of the African National Congress and now president of the Republic of South Africa, arrived in Umtata on April 21, 1990. This was his first visit to his birthplace since his release from prison earlier that year. Prior to his arrival, the city of Umtata was the scene of frantic activity: banners advertising Mandela’s visit were

being erected, and the media together with foreign visitors were flocking into Umtata. A sense of excitement prevailed among the local inhabitants of Transkei, many of whom were already in Umtata. Marshals were being recruited in anticipation of the highlight of Mandela's visit at a rally to be held the next day.

Approximately 3000 people gathered at the Umtata airport in order to welcome Mandela home. Excitement was at fever pitch as the Transkei Airways plane came into sight. Youths began *toyi-toying* and women ululating. Marshals were everywhere. Mandela emerged, dressed in a leopard skin, the mark of a chief, and carrying a spear. He gave a short impromptu speech; he spoke of his youth in this region—how he stole mealies as a small boy and hunted for birds and wild animals. As his voice broke under the strain of emotion, three thousand fists were raised in the air to meet him. No doubt an emotional moment for Mandela. According to Major General Holomisa, then leader of the Military Council in Transkei, this was a moment of unparalleled historical significance for Transkei.

During his stay in this region Mandela spoke on a number of occasions including at the mass rally. He also delivered an address to the University of Transkei (UNITRA) community. The intention of this article is to comment on these gatherings, especially on the oral poetry which was produced at these meetings, and the written poetry which appeared in local newspapers.

The arrival of Mr. Mandela led, to some extent, to a resuscitation of the production of contemporary oral poetry in this region. Besides Mr Mandela's presence, the reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, there has been the removal of the previous regime in Transkei under which this type of poetry would have been prohibited; and secondly, the partial restoration of freedom of speech within the broader southern African region.

Analysis of the Poetry

The following poem was produced at the April 22nd rally, held just outside Umtata and attended by approximately 100,000 people. Prior to Mandela's speech and immediately thereafter, there were many *iimbongi* who came forward and performed. Due to the number of poems produced, only selected extracts will be analyzed. Where the poems were originally produced in Xhosa, English translations will be provided.

The poem that follows was performed in English by two poets. The style is heavily repetitive and formulaic—a technique always evident in traditional Xhosa *izibongo*. The poets alternate, each producing one line. The poem is produced rhythmically and the last word in each line is temporally lengthened.

How can you win?
 How can I?
 How can you want to negotiate?
 Hunger is Hunger.
 Ugly is Ugly.
 How can I?
 How can you want to negotiate?
 I am hungry now,
 Behind the bars.
 I am hungry now,
 Behind the bars.

Typically, repetition structures the presentation. The poets are also skeptical about negotiations—clearly, the poem is inspired by Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetry.⁴ I quote some verses from Mbuli's poem as illustration (1989:11):

Behind the bars
 I shivered, I prayed
 This cell or the next
 A man slipped to death
 Another one used a pair of jeans to heaven
 Behind the bars.

The rally poem continues as follows:

Margaret, do not suggest it for me,
 Margaret, do not suggest it for me,
 Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, Margaret,
 is a bitch,
 Is a busy bitch,
 Margaret, Margaret,
 Margaret do not suggest it for me.
 George Bush,

⁴ Most of Mbuli's poetry is also produced in English.

George Bush is a mafia,
 George Bush is a mafia,
 A mafia.
 George Bush,
 Mafia, mafia, mafia.
 Moreover,
 I shall return,
 Behind the bars.
 Struggle inside,
 Solidarity outside,
 Margaret,
 Margaret.

The poets were clearly referring critically to the major Western leaders at the time, namely Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain and George Bush of the United States. The real issue here is their approach to sanctions. The language used to describe the two leaders is nothing less than derogatory, with Thatcher being described as a “busy bitch” and Bush as a member of the mafia. The poets appeal for solidarity outside while the struggle continues inside.

The poem continues:

Welcome home, our leaders,
 Welcome home,
 Welcome home,
 Welcome home, bawo womhlaba,
 Welcome home,
 Welcome home.
 Welcome home, Walter,
 Welcome home, Walter Sisulu,
 Welcome home,
 The Secretary,
 The General,
 In general,
 The Secretary,
 In general, welcome home, baba Sisulu,
 Welcome home,
 Welcome home,
 Welcome home, bawo Madiba, welcome home.
 Welcome home, bawo Madiba, welcome home.

This extract is again an excellent example of the formulaic style which characterizes this poetry. Notice also the play on the word “general”: “the general,” “in general,” “the secretary,” “in general welcome home.”

The poem concludes as follows:

The Chief commander of MK.
 Yiza Mkhonto,
 Yiza Mkhonto,
 Amandla!
 Awethu! (audience response)
 There is no unity in a group,
 Where laws are based on the words:
 Triple oppression and triple exploitation.
 Unworkable laws,
 Unnegotiable laws,
 Unworkable apartheid.
 This is not a mystery,
 We are making history.
 This is not a mystery,
 We are in the battle.
 Mandela released,
 Walter Sisulu in Lusaka,
 Freedom in South Africa.
 Amandla!
 Awethu! (audience response)

In this section the use of both Xhosa and English adds a new dimension to the style of praise poetry. Here the poets make it clear that apartheid cannot be negotiated: “unworkable laws, unnegotiable laws, unworkable apartheid.” The power salute, *amandla*, serves as both an opening and closing formula followed by audience response. It is also common within this poetry for the *imbongi* to utter phrases like *Mayibuye* (“Let it return”), with the audience responding *i-Afrika*.

In another poem produced on the same occasion, the late Oliver Tambo, the leader of the ANC at that time, is referred to as follows:

Ndiyamtyhafela u-Oliver Reginald Tambo:
 u-0 umele u-organizing,
 u-R umele u-Resistance,
 u-T umele u-Take-over.
 Grayani, Magerilla negraye!

I feel weak on the part of Oliver Reginald Tambo:
 O stands for organizing,
 R stands for resistance,
 T stands for take-over.
 Grayani, Magerilla negraye!

Tambo is portrayed as the epitome of what the struggle means and entails: organizing, resisting, and taking over. The interesting closing formula (“Fight on, guerillas, fight!”) makes a play on guerilla/gorilla, referring to Mkhonto soldiers.

In a poem that is more localized in the sense that it praises a local Transkei leader, an *imbongi* states the following:

Wena mpandla,
 Mpandl’empenyelele Xobololo, uvunyiwe ngokumisa ibunzi ejele kuba
 utshutshiswa nguMatanzima.
 Hayi, hayi.

You bald one,
 You shining bald one of Xobololo, they recognize you by your shining
 forehead in jail because of Matanzima’s cruelty.
 No, No.

Xobololo was the leader of the ANC in this region, an organization that was banned under the previous Matanzima regime and whose members and leaders were often harassed and detained. The extract clearly laments this history.

The poem continues:

Hamba ke mhlekazi,
 Sibulela ukuba sikubonile sizukulwana sikaDalindyebo,
 Hayi ubogorha bukaSabata.
 Kumhla sayibona le nto iyi-ANC.
 Hayi umntaka Holomisa lighawe lamaqhawe madoda.

Go then, honorable one,
 We are thankful to see you, the greatgrandchild of Dalindyebo,
 Oh! the bravery of Sabata.
 It was the day we saw this thing called the ANC.
 We agree the son of Holomisa is the most excellent one.

The *imbongi* here refers to Mandela as being the greatgrandchild of Dalindyebo, as well as to the day of Chief Sabata Dalindyebo's second burial (his remains having been exhumed), when he was buried with ANC support. It was also the day on which Holomisa raised some important issues, including Transkei's possible reincorporation into South Africa. He is praised for this advocacy.

In another poem produced in English, a poet refers to previous ruling regimes and compares them to Mandela:

He [Mandela] would see South Africa for what it could be, in justice and total equality, . . . not power, money, and personal interests.
The word has never seen may leaders of the national party, more especially Verwoerd, P.W. Botha, and Vorster, ever achieve such leadership, Instead, they drag the black struggle into the deep sea of Robben Island for life.

The extracts that follow are taken from three poems produced at the UNITRA rally on Monday, April 23. They deserve particular emphasis, since they were produced by an *imbongi* who never composes written poetry but only performs orally and spontaneously when he feels inspired to do so. Incidentally, he resides in Umtata. It is also interesting to note that he wears the traditional dress of animal skins, braided with the ANC colors, while performing.

Liphupha lamathongo,
Liphupha lamaMpunge,
Isazalo sikhale sancama,
Mingaphin' imiphefuml'ephantsi komhlaba?
Zingaphin' izidumbu ngengxa kaMandela?
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la.

It is a dream of the dead,
It's a dream that people thought would never come true,
People have cried till they gave up,
How many souls are under the ground,
How many corpses because of Mandela?
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la.

The *imbongi* here refers to those comrades who died in the struggle in order to secure Mandela's release. He also laments those comrades who perished unaware that freedom was so near.

Here is a second extract from the same *imbongi*:

Bambiza bengamazi,
 Bambiza bengazange bambone,
 Yiyo loo nto kufuneka sithozame sithozamelane,
 Kuba side sambona.
 Umzekelo kaYesu erhug' abantu abaninzi indimbane,
 Weza nabo ngenyaniso nocoselelo,
 Kuloko sinokungqina khona ke siv' amazw' akhe,
 Kuloko amazw' akhe siwaqinisekisile ukuba ayinyaniso.

They call him even if they don't know him.
 They call him even if they have never seen him before,
 That is why we need to be humble and respect one another,
 Because we have seen him at last.
 An example of Jesus followed by many people,
 He has come with them in truth and dignity,
 That is where we can witness and hear his words,
 That is where we have confirmed that his words are true.

The opening and closing couplets contain parallelisms, a common technique in the production of oral poetry. In effect, the *imbongi* is playing a mediating role here by asking people to respect one another. An interesting metaphor compares Mandela to a Christlike figure.

A third selection from this same poet follows:

Ziyac-e-e-e-engwa izinto,
 Azenziwa ngobuxhiliphothi,
 Azenziwa ngokungxanyelwa,
 Litho ch-u-u-u-u.
 Umntaka Ngubengcuka kaNgangelizwe,
 Uthe ch-u-u-u-u-u.
 Uhamba nabafundi bakhe.
 NjengoYesu,
 Uhamba noSisulu noMbeki,
 Uhamba nomHlaba,
 Uhamba namadoda aphilileyo.

Things are approached with a skill,

They are not approached with vigor,
 They are not approached with speed,
 He is steady.
 The son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe,
 He is steady.
 He is accompanied by his disciples,
 Like Jesus,
 He is accompanied by Sisulu and Mbeki,
 He is accompanied by Mhlaba,
 He is accompanied by healthy men.

Again we note the furthering of the biblical metaphor with Sisulu and others being described as disciples. There are also instances of parallelism, as in the last three lines. The poet also gives some indication of genealogy, namely “the son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe,” a common feature in traditional Xhosa *izibongo*.

Similar concerns find expression in this selection from another of his poems:

Sidiniwe ngoongcothoza,
 Hayi madoda nimhloniphe uDaliwonga,
 Sanukumgxeka nimane nisithi phantisi ngaye,
 Hayi masimbizele ngeneno,
 Azohlambulula, kodwa ndimvile,
 Uyibuyisel’ iPAC ngapha kweli cala,
 Akancedanga nto,
 Ibhahhile loo nto.
 Nde Gram!

We are tired of the traitors,
 You people must honor Daliwonga,
 Don’t blame him saying away with him,
 We must just call him aside,
 So that he can confess, but I have heard that
 He is building up the PAC that side,
 He hasn’t helped a thing,
 That has lost its value,
 I disappear!

This extract reaffirms the *imbongi*’s restored right to freedom of speech in this region. Daliwonga (Chief K.D. Matanzima’s *isikhahlelo* or praise name) is referred to as a traitor. On the other hand, the *imbongi* again plays

a mediating role, asking people to try to win him over rather than condemn him. Again, one of the essential aspects of an *imbongi's* role is that of negotiating between the people on the one hand, and the person or organization he is praising on the other. The poet also raises the issue of the Pan African Congress and Matanzima's alleged relationship with that organization.

In another poem the same *imbongi* comments on the relationship between Mandela and Sisulu, from the rally days up to the present. He also portrays the Rivonia trials and the law as follows:

Wayigqibezel' imfundo yakhe bayokudibana ngobugqwetha benyaniso,
 Khumbula kaloku amagqwetha ukutheth' ityala lawo engagqwethanga
 kweliny' igqwetha.
 Asuk' ema amagqweth' azigqwethela,
 Kuba yayingagqweth' inyaniso.

Once he [Mandela] had finished his education they [the Boers] met the law
 of truth.
 Imagine, lawyers representing themselves.
 They just stood and defended themselves,
 Because they were lawyers of the truth.

This extract makes an interesting play on the word "lawyer," *igqwetha*, given the fact that Mandela represented himself at the Rivonia trial. He was also a representative for the ANC at the negotiating table. Mandela is presented as a lawyer of truth.

The *imbongi* can also focus on the issues of unity within diversity, as in the passage below:

Asinakujika ndawo,
 iTshangaan, uMsuthu, iNyasa, umXhosa, iVend', umTswana,
 Hayi madoda noMzulu ngokunjalo,
 Singabantu abamnyama.
 Nc-e-e-edani-i-i!
 Nceda mntaka Mandela,
 Ncedani niyokuthatha uGatsha Buthelezi nimfak' estoksini
 Ingxak' ilapho.
 Thathani uGatsha Buthelezi
 Nimfak' ejele.
 Kuba nguy' odibene namagxagxa namaBhulu,
 Kuze kuf' abantu bakuthi.

Mayenzeke loo nto.

We will never change,
 Tshangaans, Sothos, Malawians, Xhosas, Vendas, Tswanas,
 And Zulus as well,
 We are black people.
 Please!
 Please, son of Mandela,
 Please go and fetch Gatsha Buthelezi and arrest him,
 The problem is there,
 Take Gatsha Buthelezi,
 Put him in jail,
 He is the one who is connected with the poor whites and Boers,
 Which results in the death of our people.
 That must be done.

The poet is appealing for a unified black people. He also goes so far as to call for the arrest of Gatsha Buthelezi in order to create a climate for unity in the struggle.

In a written poem published in *Imvo*, March 2, 1990, an *imbongi* refers to Mandela as follows:

Leza lithwel' isidanga sokumel' inyaniso yoqobo,
 Wafika gaxa! uRolihlahla irhorho yohlanga,
 Azi loda lizole de lizole na izwe leAfrika?

He came wearing a cloak of truth,
 He came wearing it! Rolihlahla, the animal of the nation,
 I wonder if there will ever be peace and harmony in Africa?

Here the poet uses a metaphor—Mandela is compared to an animal possessing certain terrifying characteristics (*irhorho*), for he is feared by the previous Apartheid regime. The *imbongi* also questions whether there will ever be complete peace in Africa.

In another poem published in *Umthunywa* (March 1990), written by an *imbongi* living at Qunu, Mandela's birthplace, the *imbongi* comments:

Zivela zizitshintsha amabala zixel' umamlambo,
 ichanti lamadoda asemaXhoseni.
 Zavela zingoo UDF, MDM, COSATO, SAWU, SARHU njalo-njalo.

They came showing their colours like a mermaid,
 a snake owned by Xhosa men,
 being UDF, MDM, COSATU, SAWU, SARHU, and so on.⁵

The *imbongi* suggests here that there are many organizations within the struggle. These are compared to *Mamlambo*, a protean creature possessing changeable characteristics. The organizations may therefore not be the same, but they still fall under the umbrella of the struggle.

The *imbongi* can also treat other principal figures in the struggle, such as the Afrikaner (then) president F.W. De Klerk:

Uyabulela umz' Ontsundu kumfana kaDe Klerk
 onesibind' sengweny' ukud' avulele umthandi
 wesizwe aphume esikiti sikaVelevutha.

The black nation is giving thanks to the son of De Klerk
 Who is brave like a crocodile
 now that he has eventually let the lover of the nation out of the jail of
 Verwoerd.

De Klerk is praised and compared to a crocodile, an animal renowned for its courage. The Apartheid jail created by Verwoerd was opened by De Klerk.

Finally, the *imbongi* asks the people to inform their ancestors, to inform Biko and Mxenge who sacrificed their lives for the struggle, that Mandela is back:

Kuba kaloku ephumile nje uRolihlahla, uyabuy' uTambo emahlatini.
 Vulani amazibuko, lunyathel' ubhel' olumanz' andonga lakuloSabata
 Dalindyebo.
 Hambani nokubikel' iintsapho zethu emangcwabeni ukuba ude wabuya
 uNelson.
 Xelelani uBiko noMxenge nithi okaMandela uphumile eluvalelweni.
 Yitshoni kuNzo abuye eLusaka, izinja zikhululwe amazinyo.
 Xelelani okaTutu OoNyawo-ntle batandazele uNelson;
 Kaloku nimcelele impilo nde ntle nje ngoMosisi, de sifike enkululekweni.

⁵ United Democratic Front, Mass Democratic Movement, Congress of South African Trade Unions, South African Workers Union, South African Railways and Harbours Union.

Because now that Rolihlahla is back, Tambo will also be back from the forests.

Pave the way so that the handsome one of Sabata Dalindyebo may walk in. Go and inform your deceased in the graves that Nelson has eventually come.

Inform Biko and Mxenge that Mandela is out of prison.

Tell Nzo that he must come back from Lusaka, the dogs no longer have teeth.

Tell Tutu that he must inform the priests that they must pray for Mandela, So that intercessions should be made for his health and long life like Moses till we get independence.

The dogs that now lack teeth are the Boer oppressors. At the same time, Mandela is compared to Moses leading the people to a better future, in the same way that Moses led the Israelites away from Pharaoh.

Similarities and Differences: Traditional versus Modern *Iimbongi*

The similarities between contemporary *izibongo* and that of the traditional *iimbongi* seem to be more obvious than the differences because of the modern *iimbongi*'s attempts to emulate the tradition of *izibongo*. The modern *iimbongi* is operating within the tradition rather than outside or in opposition to it. In support of this view, a summary of similarities follows below. This section amounts to an analysis of dress, method of delivery, stylistic techniques (including metaphor and parallelism), role, and themes.

Dress

Iimbongi operating within the Mass Democratic Movement do not necessarily have uniform dress, or any particular style of dress at all, for that matter. The choice depends entirely on the individual performer. By and large this is true of all *iimbongi* today. The traditional animal-skin robe and hat, accompanied by the carrying of a spear, are seldom seen anymore. However, one often encounters *iimbongi* wearing remnants of the traditional

dress, such as the hat, while dressed in a contemporary suit.⁶ For example, the Umtata *imbongi*⁷ wears an animal skin cloak braided with the ANC colors.

Method of delivery

Cronin makes the following general remarks with regard to contemporary oral poetry (1989:41):

The poetry is, clearly, largely a performance. The bodily presence of the poet becomes an important feature of the poetics. Arm gestures, clapping, and head nodding are often used expressively and deictically. The poets also draw freely from the current political lexis of gestures; the clenched fist salute of people's power (*amandla ngawethu*).

This style of delivery also resembles that of the traditional *imbongi*, though there are differences. For example, the guttural voice characteristic of the traditional poet is not always retained. The reason for this shift is that the modern *imbongi* wishes his audience to hear and understand each word so as to learn from the performance. The loudness and speed with which the performance takes place is, however, reminiscent of the traditional situation.⁸

Although the *imbongi* now normally holds a microphone, which can be an inhibiting factor, there is still a lot of movement in some instances. Gesture therefore still figures as an important part of the performance. Overall, the kinesic aspects of performance help both to maintain that

⁶ According to Cronin (1989:42), the clothing of the performer should also be noted. As often as not it is unexceptional. However, quite a few poets, especially those who adopt a more bardic tone, don dashikis as an integral part of their performance. The several trade union praise poets also tend to wear special clothing, traditional skins and ornamentation, or a modern-day facsimile of the kind already noted.

⁷ This *imbongi*, Bongani Sithole, operates within the ANC and is probably one of the first ANC *iimbongi* to emerge in Transkei since the unbanning of the organization.

⁸ There is also the use of what could be called "breath units" in the poetry, each line being the equivalent of one breath.

audience's attention and to support the *imbongi's* message rhetorically. Some of the *iimbongi* have also developed a type of dancing (strongly resembling the *toyitoyi*) that accompanies their poetry performances. Shouts of "amandla" accompanied by audience response are also common.

Stylistic techniques

Techniques generally associated with the production of traditional *izibongo* include personification, metaphor, and simile, all of which are closely linked and involve elements of comparison. These devices are used by modern as well as traditional *iimbongi* to create imagery, an important aspect of their art. In general terms, Cronin observes (1989:42):

The most notable verbal stylistic features are those commonly associated with principally oral cultures: the style tends to be additive, aggregative, formulaic, and "copious". . . . The repetitive and formulaic features assist the performing poet mnemonically. But these features also assist the audience to hear and understand the poem.

This characterization also supports the use of stylistic techniques such as parallelism and linking in the collected poetry, especially since parallelism promotes a certain degree of repetition.

Clearly such forms also abound in the poetry quoted above. Metaphors and similes are also common, including animal metaphors, as when De Klerk is compared to a crocodile, or the Boers are referred to as dogs without teeth.

The use of parallelism is indeed an interesting and useful device. It allows the *imbongi* to develop a particular idea, either by initial, final, or oblique linkage in a sentence. This technique is exploited throughout the *izibongo* poetry. Ideas are sometimes repeated using similar words, but keeping at least one word exactly the same as it was in the previous sentence, or placing it in a different position, perhaps at the end as opposed to the beginning of the sentence. These repetitions again assist the audience in understanding full force of the poet's meaning.

Role

The role of the *imbongi* as mediator and as political and historical commentator has been retained. The role of the modern *imbongi* is also often educational, and as such mandates reference to the history of the struggle. In connection with the modern political dimensions of the poet's role, Elizabeth Gunner states (1986:35):

The *izibongo* are a unique tool in raising worker's consciousness of their union and its role in their lives as workers. Yet they are also quite clearly an expression of a strong and old art form with its roots deep in social and political awareness.

As a historical commentator, the modern *imbongi* therefore fulfills a very important role. This responsibility can be compared to the traditional *imbongi's* constant reference to historical aspects such as the genealogy of the chief and the history of the people.

Themes

Although the poet's cache of themes has changed over time, or perhaps has been added to, it has simply adapted to accommodate new pressures. The traditional *iimbongi* (attached to chiefs) were concerned mainly with events that were taking place in the immediate area where the chief lived. Historical themes also permeated their poetry. Today, modern *iimbongi* are concerned with factors and events presently affecting their lives, and it is these that form the basis of their poetry. Their art is therefore still fueled by contemporary events, the audience's response, and so forth. Also prominent are historical perspectives regarding the origins of the struggle. In general, the themes have changed because the political and social environment (upon which the poetry is a commentary) has also changed.

Conclusion

Mr. Mandela's visit to the Transkei/Eastern Cape region not only resulted in a flood of poetry, it also reaffirmed the *imbongi's* position as a

social and political commentator in African society. The vibrant audience response and the vital poetic themes, drawing on socioeconomic and political issues as reflected in this poetry, are clear evidence of this phenomenon. The *imbongi* is fighting to come to terms with a new environment that presents different challenges. According to Gunner (1986:33),

both Zulu and Xhosa praise poetry because they exploit powerful cultural symbols with such ease, appeal in a very direct way to their listener's emotions and attitudes. They intrinsically combine political and aesthetic appeal and perhaps for this reason represent valuable "property" in any ideological struggle.

In the same vein, this article has attempted to show how the *imbongi* is a relevant and significant figure within the political and social structure of contemporary South African life.

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Perspectives on Orality in African Cinema

Keyan Tomaselli and Maureen Eke

Until the introduction to South Africa of broadcast television for the first time in January 1976, few South African universities taught media studies, though one or two courses in English literature (criticism) and drama (production and theory) had seeped into syllabi at some institutions by the end of the decade (see Davids 1980; Tomaselli 1980a; 1980b; 1985). Most courses, theoretical or production, were Eurocentric in origin, application, and approach. The notion of orality in cinema or television studies was not an issue, having only recently been elevated onto the South African academic agenda (Tomaselli and Sienaert 1990).

In this essay we attempt to accomplish three tasks. An overview of the relationship between literacy and orality with regard to teaching about cinema is the first. This section is followed by some general observations on Third Cinema in Africa and its incorporation of oral codes into its critical visual narratives, with reference to a film made by a Cameroonian director, *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai* (1991). We end with a case study of a particular South African film, *The Two Rivers* (1985), which we argue has been generally misunderstood by its critics because of its problematic attempt to mesh the codes of orality with those of the visual image. These three themes are framed within an overall call for the teaching of cinema in South Africa within both the literate and oral imperatives.

The New Moment of Visual Literacy

Visual literacy involves learning how to approach critical interpretations of visual messages (cinema, television, video, photography, graphics, and so on). A more comprehensive approach would examine how such texts are produced, and how different audiences make meaning of them. Discussion of visual literacy often occurs without reference to orality,

which is the other side of the coin as far as much African cinema is concerned.

The first move in the direction of visual literacy occurred under the guidance of Johan Grové of the white Transvaal Education Department (TED) in the late 1970s. His subsequent MA thesis, "The Theory and Practice of Film Study at Secondary School Level" (1981), a report on his experiment at six schools during the late '70s, offered an elitist "high culture" literary basis for what the TED formalistically calls "film study." This course was introduced in 1986.¹ Grové's semiotic (the study of how meaning is made) was followed by John van Zyl's accessible and useful, but equally semiotic ally formalist, *Imagewise* (1989), used by TED teachers. These studies gave way to a number of M.A. and Ph.D. theses then registered at various English-language universities under similar topics (Woodward 1992; Ballot 1993). Only one, however, by Tracey Hiltermann (1993), explicitly deals with issues of orality in relation to visual literacy.

Both Grové and van Zyl decontextualize their examples from the South African condition, thus ignoring local film, television, and theoretical debates. They also assume white Western literate readers and users both in their constructions of film audiences and as users of their writings. Because their examples are of Western film and Westernized viewers, they do not confront issues of orality or how primarily oral or even semi-literate cultures might make sense of film.

Lacking thus far in South African discussions on visual literacy, especially relating to cinema, film, and video, are debates on how this idea could be applied in South Africa to meet the demands of literate, semi-literate, and nonliterate students interacting through western-African and African orality-based cultures. This is a crucial point, as sight (that is, emphasis on the visual) fragments consciousness, situating the observer outside of what s/he sees. In contrast, sound incorporates, locating the observer at the center of an auditory world. Literate cultures, which stress the visual, store knowledge in written and other kinds of documents provided by recording and retrieval technologies. Oral cultures, in contrast, encode knowledge in the popular communal memory. The encounter between the two kinds of cultures through industrialization has resulted in imbalances which favor the dominance of the technological. As will be

¹ See Ballot 1991 for a critique.

argued below, African film makers are cultural intermediaries between the two forms of expression.

Most commentaries, e.g., van Zyl (1989) and the majority of authors in *Media Matters in South Africa* (Prinsloo and Criticos 1991), a conference proceedings which marked the “moment” of school media studies in South Africa, simply assume that approaches, discussions, and theories dominant in other parts of the world (mostly Anglo-Saxon and French), whether Marxist, positivist, or liberal-humanist, will automatically apply to all South African audiences and film makers. The fit between Western cinema and white South African audiences may be quite close, but the question remains on how oral-based communities and semi-literate viewers make sense of the same films.

The direct importation to Africa of methods, theories, ideas, and psychoanalytical assumptions developed in the First World is not without epistemological problems. These methods and theories assume particular sets of modern and post-modern conditions and periodizations not necessarily replicated in Africa or South Africa in quite the same ways (Muller and Tomaselli 1990). They often cannot account for ways in which African and Western/Eastern forms of expression have meshed, or for indigenous ways of knowing and making sense. Needed are theories that can account for the various, often widely different and original, African applications of imaging and recording technologies, and their resulting aesthetics.²

African interpretations of Western media, their rearticulation into different African contexts, and theoretical mixes that acknowledge the impact of traveling theories on our analytical tools similarly need explication and development. One route for such explanation is to study the way Third Cinema techniques have been employed by various African film makers, from Algeria in the North to South Africa in the South, as a way to indigenize our theoretical perspectives on film, video, and cinema.³

² See, for example, Tomaselli and Sienaert 1989 and Eke and Tomaselli 1992 on the South African oral-based storytelling found in films like *Songololo* and *The Two Rivers*, and videos like *The People's Poet* (1987), *I am Clifford Abrahams*, *This is Grahamstown* (1984) and Piet Draghoender's lament in *Kat River—The End of Hope* (1984).

³ See, e.g., Achebe et al. 1990.

Third Cinema

Third Cinema is a set of strategies developed by critical film makers in South America and North Africa (Solanas and Gettino 1976; Pines and Willemsen 1989). The ideas underlying Third Cinema have only very recently gained exposure in South Africa.⁴ First Cinema describes Hollywood entertainment; Second Cinema accounts for avant garde, personal, or auteur movies. Third Cinema is a cinema of resistance to imperialism and oppression, a cinema of emancipation; it articulates the codes of an essentially First World technology into indigenous aesthetics and mythologies. Since the 1980s, Third Cinema has been transplanted into other sites of resistance, including those in First world situations where class conflicts have taken on a racial/ethnic character.

Third Cinema is not a genre but rather a set of political strategies using film (and video) to articulate the experiences and hopes of the colonially oppressed. Its purpose, according to Solanas and Gettino (1976), is to create a “liberated space” by educating the oppressed. Much of critical African cinema is Third Cinema in nature. An example is Ousmane Sembene and Thierno Sow’s *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), whose focus is the examination of the colonial experience.

African films, and much of Third Cinema, tend to be explicitly political. They start from the social premise that the Community is in the individual rather than that the Individual is in the community, as is the case with Western genre cinema. By “political” is meant the need to reconquer and to revise images of Western representations about Africa beamed back at the continent by international news agencies and cinemas. Critical African cinema is about the right of Africans to represent themselves to themselves, and to others, in cinema, television, and media in general. They contest mediated images recirculated to Africa from Western and Islamic neo-colonial centers. Jean-Marie Teno, a Cameroonian now living in Paris, characterizes the magnitude of the task through the words of his narration in *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai* (1991): “colonialism perpetrated cultural genocide.” The struggle of Africans is to overcome this genocide, and feelings of inferiority are its results. As one of his indignant but humorous characters complains: “Even when it comes to the number of seasons, we’re surpassed by Europe!”

⁴ Botha and Van Aswegen 1992; Maingard 1991; Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1992.

While class analysis may have dropped from sight in the First World metropolises of academic production following the breakup of the Soviet Union, it remains high on the agenda of most critical African film makers. This activity takes place in the context of the modern African state, which has largely disempowered indigenous cultures. As witnesses to their time, critical African film makers watch, record, probe, and participate in struggles for democracy and social and economic emancipation. The voice of the film maker is always clear, though sometimes the messages are encoded in allegory to avoid censorship. Fictions are preferred to documentary films. Documentaries, thought by governments and censors to be about “truth,” tend to attract more severe censorship.

Funding problems have led to a degree of insecurity among African film makers. It can take years to raise adequate finance for full-length films, and so the temptation is sometimes to cram as much into a single film as possible—the problem with *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai*, which intertwines about five narratives into one. But even here, such encoding derives from the Third Cinema theory, which holds that film makers should mobilize anything that works in educating “the masses” to the nature of their oppression under neo-colonialism—whether from the East or the West. Teno uses documentary, re-enactments, news footage, humor, drama and music, and monochrome. Direct and indirect narration, dialogue, and subtitles reflect the oral emphasis of African culture. This orality is further emphasized in that the storyline is advanced through a variety of different characters—as opposed to the single meta-narrator of conventional First Cinema. Music (songs, performances, lyrics), for example, is sometimes heavily foregrounded, operating as a narrative voice in its own right. The result, in the case of *Afrique*, is an entertaining post-modernist political protest film that retains the depth and irony of the oral style.

African Ontological “Grammars”

Third Cinema practitioners thus rearticulate and localize Western-invented technologies in the service of African themes, stories, forms of oral storytelling, and cultural expression. Africa participates in ontologies that suggest the generation of new and alternate visual grammars, different from those found in more industrialized societies. These draw on linguistic structures that have no grammar for dealing with things that exist

quite without relation to other things. African languages, unlike languages that have emerged from industrial economies, describe a world consisting of more than objects. In an important way, their grammar (especially when it has not been subjected to the attentions of European educational specialists), has a place for qualifying something in terms of its relatedness to the other things, persons, and animals around it.

African Third Cinema directors are part of their societies, in relating to and exploring everyday activities. Editing and encoding in African films reflect this common sense in which the world is interconnected through language. The writer in *Afrique*, for example, works at her typewriter in the middle of a busy street, not in seclusion, in the isolation of the Western artist or *littérateur*. She is part of the everyday life about which she is writing and which surrounds her. This image raises questions about the nature of Africanicity and its emphasis on Being, on totality, on an integrated world not separated into dualisms—counterposed to a world where the Western artist tends to hide away from “life” in seclusion while “creating.”

These scientifically derived mind/body separations that characterize Western art are further sharpened by the move from orality to literacy. The result is to drastically reduce reliance by the young literate educated on their oral elders for information. This process of enculturation into the industrialized technological world results in the foregrounding of individualist over communal activities and thought, leading to a disruption of traditional generational forms of respect.

Ethnographic film and video may also be inadequate to the task of reintegrating the Subject with the Object, since it tends to separate the visible world of actual behavior from the invisible spiritual realm, which often remains real and concrete to their African subjects. Africans may make no distinctions between the material and the spiritual. It is not an accident, then, that much of early African philosophy was most sensitively recorded by a few sympathetic European missionaries and theologians (e.g., Tempels 1959). In visual terms, this task of recording and articulating African philosophies has now fallen to African film makers. The integration of the spiritual and the material are partly found in the oral nature that many African societies have sustained through the centuries of colonization and Westernization.

Teno's film, *Afrique*, which shows how the original oral culture of Cameroon has been influenced by writing, is driven by the thorny question

of how to steer Africa out of its cultural vulnerability—a vulnerability that has led to its apparent helplessness and internal repression by the black elite apparachiks of global capital. Writing brought with it a new form of oppression—that regulated by the modern state bureaucracy. But African directors, in decolonizing Western images of Africa presented to Africans, face the problem of Hollywood-hooked audiences and escapist entertainment-seeking in their own countries. Thus, while African governments mostly ban films made by their critical citizens, they also become artistic fodder for First World film festival circuits. As such, the paradox of Third African Cinema is that its makers act as cultural intermediaries germinating oral and visual styles and themes that are currently stored in exile, waiting for appropriate conditions before returning home.

We now turn to a South African case study. Here we try to identify the voices encoded in the film, and the degree to which the “traditionally” oral predominates.

Case Study: *The Two Rivers*

The Venda poet Rashaka Ratshitanga takes us on a “journey” through the history of his people’s dispossession by the “Boers,” and later apartheid South Africa. The film opens with white scrolled captions on a black background:

The narrator of this film, Rashaka Ratshitanga lives in Venda, a rural area of South Africa. Recently the South African government declared Venda an “independent state” in accordance with their policy of apartheid. For his opposition to this policy, Rashaka has been detained incommunicado for a prolonged period by security police. Rashaka spent twenty years as a migrant labourer in Johannesburg and returned to Venda in 1975. He is a writer and a poet.

Later on Ratshitanga says to the camera, “Let me take you on a journey into the heartland of this country following the course of the two rivers which are now forging the destiny of my people.”

Historically, *The Two Rivers* is the story of the Venda people and their subjugation by European colonists. We are presented with an idyllic picture of Vendaland prior to the coming of the Europeans. Rashaka

mentions the various conflicts between the Vendas and their neighbors, as well as the Boers, and indicates that until the British arrival in the late nineteenth century when they overthrew the Venda King, they were a stable and independent people.

Themes of *Two Rivers*

- the two rivers—symbolic—a white river of white culture and a black river of black culture, which according to Rashaka, merge in Johannesburg.
- the dispossession of Venda people by South Africa represented in the loss of the land; and the death of certain Venda customs such as the age-group initiation rites. Ratshitanga refers to himself as one of the last participants in the boys' adolescent initiation rites.
- the South African bantustan policy—Venda was one of the so-called independent homelands. Ratshitanga questions the meaning of independence for the Vendas, pointing cryptically to the “signs” of independence: Western economic colonization (Kentucky Fried Chicken); a brewery industry—ironically one of the crippling outcomes of colonization is a high rate of alcoholism among the colonized; the wasteland that Venda has become; and poor housing. He also points to the complicity of Africans in their own disempowerment—the leaders of all the homelands are implicated in this role.
- migratory labor to Johannesburg represented by the emergence of a new black/African culture or city—Soweto. This resulted in the loss of children and human resources from Vendaland—people drawn to the glitter and illusory promise of jobs in South African urban areas. This migration began after the 1930s. Ratshitanga names himself as one of these migrants.

- the conflict of cultures that is a prominent theme in the writings of African and other colonized peoples. Here there are two major conflicts: a) the initial European/African cultural conflict; and b) the new African (Sowetan)/white South African (Johannesburg) cultural conflict.
- the general violence of apartheid—Africans as victims and perpetrators of violence.
- the role of the emerging African youth (particularly in the urban areas) in the new South African society.

At another level, *The Two Rivers* is also the story of Rashaka Ratshitanga—the man, the poet. This story, however, is quite dislocated as Rashaka the narrator tends to get lost and separated from the film's narrative. The result is a tension of subjectivities between the oral telling by Ratshitanga and the visual recordings of the crew. Ratshitanga, instead of offering an interior participatory point of view, offers an exterior observational perspective of his story and that of "his people." On more than one occasion, for example, Ratshitanga undermines his own intention and presence as storyteller by walking out of frame (Maingard 1986:22). The camera seems, in parts, then, to sometimes follow a narrative thread separate from that of the narrator, especially when he is talking about Johannesburg.

Why does this film seem aligned with the apartheid government's perspective, as many foreign anti-apartheid evaluators have claimed (Tomaselli 1992)? Or does *The Two Rivers* subvert language in order to communicate certain political messages? Ratshitanga does not make any overt anti-government statements. In fact, the word "apartheid" is rarely mentioned. On the one hand, this is consistent with his literary character as the chronicler, the teller of truths, the objective narrator, the *imbongi*. On the other hand, this objectivity is sometimes undermined when Ratshitanga treats such sensitive areas as the meaning of independence for the Vendas; or when he makes provocative statements about Soweto being a city of violence; or when he degrades the issue of the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902); or when he accuses the British and the Boers of being the dispossessors of the Vendas. The director's choice of film shots/images to associate with some of these statements points to a subtext that perhaps

neither the government's censors nor some anti-apartheid viewers could identify.

The problem in identifying the political position of the film stems from the (erratic) authority given Ratshitanga by the film crew complemented by incorporation of "dominant" apartheid discourses. The narrator, as do the film makers, fail to develop clear visual and verbal oppositional discourses through which to articulate their message. As an exterior representation of the narrator's self, *The Two Rivers* tends to relegate its subjects to silence, preferring the film makers' direct address perspective. Jae Maingard (1986:35) concludes that: "It would seem that the film maker [Mark Newman?] has wanted to elevate rural, ritualistic societies above any other form of society and in doing so has inscribed his own romantic notions of such societies into the film, with the help of the narrator, who represents a similar view." This perhaps explains the insertion of the seemingly arbitrary female initiation rite (women's dance) into the film. This perspective of a "naive" rural society supports the Western romantic view of a pristine Africa, innocent, unsophisticated. As Maingard (1986:37) puts it, "*The Two Rivers* is a predominantly imperative text." It is the imperative, seemingly non-political position adopted by the film makers, despite Ratshitanga's harassment by the Security Police, that led some audiences to conclude that the film was progovernment, and therefore uncritical of apartheid. The film makers' deliberate decision against using the word "apartheid," however, does not make the film pro-apartheid propaganda (see Steenveld 1990:132). This assertion will be clarified below as we try to identify the codes of the *imbongi* and the film makers' attempts to translate them from the oral to the visual medium.

The *Imbongi* as Narrator

Ratshitanga is a poet, a literary critic. Therefore, he is the most appropriate person to tell the story of his people. In traditional African societies, Ratshitanga would be the *griot* or *imbongi*, that is, an oral historian. He indicates this status by suggesting to the audience that his name signifies the "one who tells the truth." *The Two Rivers*, then, if rather tortuously, is trying to emulate the codes of the *imbongi*, and to function as a praise poem, with the poem (the interaction of the oral, visual and performative) suggesting a way forward. The confluence of the previously

separate black and white cultures in the big cities can result in a new stream that could show the way to the future. This is the film's message.

As the chronicler of his people's lives and stories, Ratshitanga must document what he sees. But he does not necessarily have to take any positions, or make any value judgments or critical comments. It is in this sense that the ideological position in the film seems amorphous. In order to find any ideological leanings, we must examine the subtext of the film that often emerges in the moments when he asks what appear to be rhetorical questions. A typical example is the questioning of what independence means for the Vendas; another is at the end of the film when he wonders whether the new African youth will hear their people's cry from the past. For Ratshitanga, *The Two Rivers* is also about the rewriting or reconstruction of a people's history to incorporate the Venda voice into the history of South Africa. Whereas the textbooks provided by the South African apartheid government tended to erase African voices in the telling of their own stories, Ratshitanga attempts to inject that voice into the "telling" in this film. This is his story as well as that of his people.

Both Ratshitanga's and the Venda stories are linked by his personal experiences, which parallel those of his people (or kinspeople). It is therefore not surprising that in his telling of this story some romanticism emerges. He rewrites (retells) Venda history to incorporate the view that Vendas were a politically viable society before the coming of the Europeans, and that it was actually the Europeans who destroyed Venda civilization. Part of the method used in the rewriting of this history is the incorporation of some cultural aspects—the initiation rites, the oral performance of the people's story by the elders, his own use of oral narrative devices as in, for example, the use of proverbs. In fact, in reconstructing the Venda story, Ratshitanga also undermines that of the Boers, indicating that for the Vendas the Boer war was like a fight between two dogs over stolen meat.

Ratshitanga's function as the chronicler, or oral historian, is often underscored by the various changes of his narrative character. When we first see him at the start of the film, he addresses the audience as the narrator. In one scene, he is without his glasses. A few minutes later, facing the audience, he puts on a pair of glasses that symbolically provide more sight (to see beyond the "ordinary") and perhaps more insight into the life of his people. In this sense, he becomes our (Western?) magnifying lens in our quest for knowledge about the Vendas. In addition, to be consistent

with his role as the poet, chronicler, and perhaps visionary of this narrative, Ratshitanga must assume a personality appropriate for any given context during the course of his narration. As such, his change of clothing, for example, on the trip to Johannesburg, becomes an attempt to reflect the environment, a change in world view and culture. It is also a metaphor for cultural transformation, here for Westernization. Ratshitanga symbolically clothes himself in Western values, and becomes a paradigm of the merging two rivers. He is simultaneously an African and a Western. In conclusion, the film's promotional blurb states:

The *Two Rivers* is a rural Black South African's perspective on the history of his people, the colonial era, the early Apartheid era and the present day. It is also an interwoven tapestry of the political, economic and cultural forces present in the South African society and as such fills in much of the background detail and texture required for a fuller understanding of our current situation.

As we have argued above, *The Two Rivers* is actually an uneven interaction of subjectivities (Ratshitanga's, the film's crew), and as such, is a rather disjointed "tapestry." However, the film does represent an experiment in providing points of confluence of the two rivers at a variety of levels:

- a) the two rivers of "black" and "white" cultures,
- b) the two rivers of expression—orality and film,
- c) the two rivers of "white" and "black" histories,
- d) the two rivers of written and oral expressions,
- e) and the two rivers of urban and rural civilizations.

Secondary Orality

What both Teno and Newman/Ratshitanga are offering are attempts at analysis through secondary orality. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan (1964:57): these directors are attempting to speak to both Western and African audiences through a "technologized extension of our consciousness," drawing on the codes of orality, literacy, and visuality.

The spoken word was the first technology that permitted humans to separate themselves from their environment and understand it in a new way. In the scene where one of Teno's characters is typing in the middle of a

street, he is calling attention to the new form of meaning exchange facilitated by writing and mechanized writing technology. The typist is part of the street scene but also excluded/alienated from the passers-by. Teno, therefore, encourages the audience to interrogate reality as it is perceived by drawing attention to the character's location in the film's narrative as well as to perception as the subject of the film. By filming the scene in this way, Teno simultaneously extends our consciousness by overlaying the primarily oral and the literate with secondary orality. Films and television heralded the age of secondary (electro-chemical and electronic) orality, and thereby the recuperation of a modified form of primary orality through audio and visual recording technologies. Both *The Two Rivers* and *Afrique* thus attempt to intertwine the oral, the literate, and the visual—resulting in a new form of secondary orality that does not derive from the dualisms driving the conceptions of industrialized cultures.

In all the films and videos mentioned in our analysis, the narrative revolves around spoken language rather than visual conventions. The editing strategy used by Hayman on *I am Clifford Abrahams, This is Grahamstown* follows the logic of Abraham's verbal telling of his story. In *Kat River*, illiterate Piet Draghoender's lament is in stark contrast to the rest of the colored peasant farming community's relatively literate culture. Both *Songololo* and *The People's Poet* use music, images, documentary realism, post-modernist editing techniques, interviews, news footage, captions sculptured in terms of the encompassing film frame, and composition—all subordinated to the spoken, the storytelling of Mbuli and Mhlope, all of which comes over as a politicized form of music television (MTV).

All of the films use oral storytelling to teach audiences not just about past history, but about contemporary processes impacting them directly, as well as about those that can be expected in the future. Especially in *Afrique*, *The Two Rivers*, *Songololo*, and *The People's Poet*, the storytellers practice the craft of the *imbongi* or *griot*. The *imbongi* links the community to its past, present, and future.

The storytellers in the above films are in some ways similar to the pre-modern European idea of bards. A bard was a mediator of language who composed his stories out of the available linguistic resources of the culture. The result was a series of consciously structured messages that served to communicate to a society a confirming, reinforcing version of themselves (Fiske and Hartley 1979:86).

Modern African bards, *imbongis* or storytellers, have only residues of existing “traditional societies” to reinforce. Their societies no longer exist in their original forms, though sometimes quite marked traces of traditional values remain, as do (receding) elements of primary orality. Whereas primarily oral cultures elaborate their stories within the epic form and extraordinary heroes and fantasies, the *imbongis* in the above films are more concerned with cultural loss, oppression, colonization, and emancipation.

Imbongis using the media of modernity tend to offer more concrete explications, communicating through a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, facilitated through media technologies. Here, we recall Ratshitanga’s direct address to the camera and his use of the spectacles to make a point about “seeing” beyond the surface of things. Mzwakhe Mbuli and Gcina Mhlope similarly speak to audiences personally, involving them in their stories, provoking memories of primary orality through the use of metaphors, alliteration, repetitions, and mnemonic devices.

The words of the *imbongi* resist the Western attachment to things and concrete existence. The films discussed here constitute an attempt to arrest the process of exteriority, where consciousness breaks into the mind/body duality. Ratshitanga is trying to recover communality, but in a new way, through the meshing of Western and indigenous cultures, wherein the confluence of two (cultures) rivers can join into a new mighty, just, and mutually acceptable direction. *The Two Rivers*, far from being apartheid propaganda, is rather a plea for integration.

Conclusion

The new study of visual media in some, mostly Indian and white, South African schools should not be a simple transposition from experiments that might have shown signs of success in Europe, Australia, or the United States. Some cinema and television studies at South African universities have already succumbed to this temptation by simply transporting Screen Theory as imposed by the journal *Screen*, during the 1970s and early ‘80s, directly into their uneasy attempts to understand South African cinema.

While such theory and analytical experience is fundamentally important in developing courses on visual literacy in South Africa, local conditions and frames of reception and production should not be summarily

ignored. The differences between black urban school children and black rural peasant children may be even greater than the differences that pertain between black and white urban children. One adheres primarily to the oral; the other to a mixture of oral and visual cultures, though both are increasingly moving through worlds of visual images.

As the comedic singer (*griot* or *imbongi*) in Teno's film ironically puts the case for Africa: "When Africans will make their own films, I'll go back to the movies." Africans *are* making their own films. The range of styles across the continent is astonishing, while some lack style altogether. The real question becomes how to reach African audiences. In South Africa, this translates not only to the challenge presented by the restructuring of our racially, legislatively, and spatially fractured educational systems, but also to the problem of teaching about the visual media in multicultural classrooms in such a way that the already visually literate learn from those who still possess the skills, practices, interpretive frameworks, and values of orality, and vice versa.

Systematic research on how African film makers and audiences make sense of films and television remains to be put on the academic research agenda. Only then will authentic Southern African identities—reflecting the meshing of the different histories of language, communication, and expression of its inhabitants—begin to emerge.⁵

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***Matigari*: An African Novel as Oral Narrative Performance**

F. Odun Balogun

The examination of *Matigari*'s pre-composition history, the role of the Gikuyu oral literary tradition in its conception, its mode of characterization, its structural and compositional organization, the kinds of linguistic and stylistic formulas that it employs, as well as the details of its temporal, geographical, and philosophical setting all point to the fact that the novel was meticulously written to conform to the characteristics of the traditional African oral epic narrative performance. Indeed, the following analysis shows that *Matigari* possesses the generic traits shared by many cultural epics from classical times to our days.

Pre-Composition History

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's leading writers, has recently attracted much critical attention because of his historic decision to switch from English to his native Gikuyu as his language of creative writing. In his recent books of essays (*Decolonizing the Mind* and *Moving the Center*), Ngugi convincingly argues that the use of foreign languages by African writers not only unwittingly promotes the underdevelopment of African indigenous language literatures, but also paradoxically perpetuates the negative inscription of the African image, characteristic of colonial literature, for the consumption of African youths. Ngugi further argues that, aside from alienating its primary audience, African literature in foreign languages is inaccessible to the vast majority of the African population. It is to initiate the creation of an accessible literature with a positive self-image for African readers that Ngugi has decided to follow the example of the less famous African writers who create in African languages. But as Ngugi reveals in *Detained* (1981:8-9), it turned out to be much easier to make this logical decision than to put it into practice. The

writing of his first Gikuyu novel *Caitani Mutharabaini* (*Devil on the Cross*) confronted him with several practical problems that he had not previously considered. Even though Ngugi faced the challenges of this new mode of writing with determination and a wealth of experience from producing successful novels, the outcome of the experiment in terms of audience reception was still unknown.

Fortunately, however, the enterprise proved successful beyond his wildest imagination. During the first year of its publication alone, *Caitani Mutharabaini* was reprinted three times; even illiterate peasants and workers bought the novel and had it read to them in their homes. Some listened to public readings in drinking bars, others heard it inside buses and taxis while in transit, and many more gathered to hear it read during lunch breaks. After witnessing this unique “appropriation of the novel into the oral tradition” through the process of a “group reception of art” that “used to be the norm” in Africa (1986:82-85), Ngugi most naturally created his second Gikuyu novel, *Matigari*, primarily for oral reception, a fact that explains why the prefatory notes to the novel are addressed “TO THE READER/ LISTENER” (1987:ix).

Writings composed to be read to listeners are not new, of course, but they seem to be the option preferred by writers who wish to propagate religious or political ideologies in an environment where the majority cannot read or write, as was the case in Biblical times and is currently the situation in Africa. Ngugi believes that since the ruling political and intellectual elites of Kenya have compromised themselves by collaborating with foreign neocolonial forces to undermine Kenyan independence, the only groups capable of reinstating true independence are those constituting the illiterate majority population of peasants and workers. It is to open a dialogue with these hitherto neglected classes of literature consumers that Ngugi purposely composed *Matigari* in Gikuyu for oral reception.

Gikuyu Oral Literary Tradition

One of the primary distinctions between the literatures of Africa and the Western world is the centrality of the role of the oral tradition in the former and its progressive deemphasis in the latter. Consequently, the concern over the character of the relationship between the written and oral traditions within the works of African writers has been a permanent feature

of literary criticism. Emmanuel Obiechina, for instance, remarked that African writers' borrowing from the oral tradition did not constitute "a literary fad or an attempt to exoticize West African literature" (1975:26). In fact, Bernth Lindfors believed that the best works emerging from Africa were those that artfully blended elements of the oral and written traditions, and it was in this tendency that he located Amos Tutuola's originality (1978:32, 59). The same awareness had led Chinweizu and Madubuike to prescribe a return to oral traditions as the primary source of inspiration for African writers (1980:146, 290, 291). Ngugi himself in *Homecoming* had designated the blend resulting from the mixture of the oral and written traditions as *orature* (1972:76).

More recent studies show that orature is today the most dominant trend in African literature.¹ *Matigari* is an illustration of how this trend has been taken to its most logical development by Ngugi. Whereas earlier classical instances of orature such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman," and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* had negotiated the contours of their genres on terms dictated predominantly by the Western literary tradition, *Matigari* defines its own artistic nature on terms dictated primarily by the Gikuyu oral tradition. Thus, in *Matigari* oral tradition does not serve, as in the past, but rather is served by the Western novelistic tradition.

Since traditional novelistic criticism has not provided tools for the analysis of a work like *Matigari*, we must turn to the scholarship in oral tradition, where critics have recognized the so-called "gray areas" (Foley 1988:164) in which orality and literacy interact to produce texts that exhibit what Walter Ong calls the "'literate orality' of the secondary oral culture" (1982:160). Ong distinguishes the primary oral culture, in which orality is not a choice, from the literate culture that aspires to create a secondary—in other words literate—orality. Orally derived texts have distinctive characteristics that set them apart from works such as the Western novel, whose history is almost synonymous with the history of writing and literacy in the West. The characteristics exhibited by *Matigari*, on the other hand, show the greatest affinity to the most developed genre of oral narrative in Africa—the oral epic.

Any initial doubts concerning the existence of the epic genre in Africa have since been conclusively laid to rest, and insightful scholarship

¹ See espec. Jones 1989, Sienaert et al. 1991, and Balogun 1991:111-29.

by Isidore Okpewho (1979), John William Johnson (1986), and a host of others has continued to elaborate on both the peculiarly African as well as the universal traits of the African epic.² In the rest of this chapter, therefore, *Matigari* will be analyzed from the perspective of the most essential characteristics of the epic as elaborated by Albert B. Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960) and subsequently refined by scholars like Walter J. Ong, John Miles Foley (1990, 1991, 1995), Johnson, and Okpewho.

Epic Characterization

I. *The Epic Hero*

Matigari, the main character whose name provides the title for the narration, is the epic hero par excellence, a fact made more than evident by his physical, ethical, and moral traits, his relationship with fellow human beings, nature and the supernatural, as well as by the character of his inscrutable destiny. The birth, childhood, and teenage years of Matigari are not presented; he comes into the tale as a man of indeterminate age who has the mysterious capacity to look old, complete with wrinkles, one minute, and young and fresh the next. On several occasions, he mystifies onlookers by visibly changing before their very eyes from old age to youthfulness, or vice versa:

“Age crept back on his face; the wrinkles seemed to have increased and deepened. How everything had changed. What was this world coming to?” (1987:29).

“The courage of truth had once again transformed him. It seemed to have wiped age off his face, making him look extremely youthful” (31).

“Matigari felt sad.... Age seized him. His pace slackened, and he merely dragged his feet along” (41).

² Another question that has been satisfactorily resolved by Okpewho (1979:65-66; 154-60), Johnson (1986:30-38), and others was the erroneous claim by earlier scholars who had insisted that epics must necessarily be composed in verse. The study of African epics is steadily growing, and a valuable, copious, and well organized bibliography was published in Westley 1991.

“His eyes shone brightly. All the creases on his face had gone, and youth had once again returned to him” (43).

His physical size is also a matter of mystery. At one time, he is reported to be “a tiny, ordinary-looking man” (75), at another, he is described as “a tall, well-built, elderly man” (111), and still at other times it is said of him that “The man is a giant” (76, 159). He also seems to be situated in a timeless existence, measuring his age in centuries of African historical experiences and in terms that seem to make him coeval with Africa itself. In what we can only describe as an epic understatement of time duration, he remarks: “I have seen many things over the years. Just consider, I was there at the time of the Portuguese, and at the time of the Arabs, and at the time of the British” (45).

Matigari also has supernatural personal traits that link him with such African, European, and other cultural epic heroes as Sunjara, Ozidi, Beowulf, and Odysseus. His voice, for instance, sounds like thunder (80, 124); his snoring is “like the roar of a lion in the wilderness” (137); his look penetrates one’s soul (123); he communicates with animals (143); he has a superhuman capacity to sustain hunger (12, etc.); he fears no man but rather strikes fear into others (31, 114-15); he accurately foretells the future, as is the case with the prediction that John Boy will not live in his house as long as he, Matigari, is alive (124, etc.).

Matigari is credited with performing miracles. The stones that are hurled at him by children, for instance, are miraculously deflected (73) and he “seemed to be protected by some magic power, for the bullets [shot at him by soldiers] did not hit him.... It was as if on reaching him they turned into water” (173). He escapes prison, a mental hospital, and a burning house, and he outwits the combined team of the police and the army who are hunting and shooting to kill him (80, 161-69). He traverses the whole country, making mysterious appearances to different people at different times and places, and all in one day (67-113). The mysterious torrential rains, which start to fall at the very moment he is about to be captured by his enemies and which aid his mysterious disappearance, vividly recall the frequent protective interventions by the gods on behalf of the heroes in such epics as *Mwindo*, *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad*.³ Indeed, Matigari with his mystery and power reminds us more of the demi-gods like Gilgamesh and

³ See Okpewho 1979:105-34.

Achilles than of ordinary mortals who are merely favored by the gods such as Sunjara and Hektor.

Not only does Matigari communicate with animals, and not only are natural elements such as torrential rains and fire⁴ friendly to him, but nature as a whole sympathizes with him and seems to exist solely to reflect his mood. Each of the three days constituting the temporal setting of the tale is a perfect mirror of Matigari's changing states of mind. The sun shines even though the heat is oppressive on the first day of his hope-filled (sunny) return to liberate his people from the oppressive heat of imperialist exploitation (2, 5). On the second day, when uncertainties pervade Matigari's mind regarding the possibility of finding truth and justice as the guiding principles of rightful governance in the society, the weather too is ambivalent: "There was no sunshine. There was no rain. It was neither warm nor cold. A dull day" (71, 89, 101). On the third day events rush dramatically to a conclusion with the epic chase of the hero by the combined forces of secret service men, the police, and the army, who are depicted as modern-day monsters, and who corner him into a house bombarded with the awesome power of their united guns. That house burns in a mighty conflagration, but Matigari nonetheless escapes only to be chased like a hunted fox by an army of government forces on horseback and accompanied by police dogs. On this third climactic day, the weather is portentous: "The sun was blazing, hotter than the hottest coals, and scorched them mercilessly. The grass withered and wilted in the heat" (137). With a prophetic perceptiveness, the female character Guthera remarks: "This kind of heat harbours ill" (*idem*). Indeed, the conflagration that subsequently devours the house and the bloody events of the climactic day have been foreshadowed on the first day by nature: "The sun had set by now, but it had left behind a blood-red glow in the evening sky, lighting up the house, the gate and the road on which they stood" (47-48).

Matigari, who thinks of the origin of social evils in cosmic terms ("What curse has befallen us that we should now be fighting one another?" 18, 53), is depicted as a returned hero after a long absence. The length of his absence, which engenders in him a naivete and ignorance of contemporary reality, elicits sympathetic wonder and admiration in his followers (29, 143) and a satirical comparison with the American legendary

⁴ Such as the conflagration that engulfed John Boy's house, in which Matigari is trapped and from which he escapes.

character Rip Van Winkle by his enemies (118). However, his name, Matigari ma Njiruungi, which identifies him as a veteran of the Mau Mau patriotic army that waged the ten-year guerilla war (1952-62) that finally compelled the British colonial administration to grant independence to Kenya, invites a more respectable comparison with the heroes of return epics such as Odysseus. Just as the ancient Greek hero, for instance, comes back to set his house in order, so Matigari returns, consumed with righteous indignation against those who have wrongfully appropriated what he calls his home. His home, we soon discover, is a symbol for the Kenyan nation, which he believes has been usurped and vandalized by inimical neocolonial forces comparable in greed and selfishness both to Penelope's suitors and to the pretender king who had cheated Sunjara out of his royal inheritance. The mission of Matigari, as the symbolic embodiment of the Kenyan people, is to regain his kingdom, which has been lost to the ethics of greed and avarice, and to restore it to its traditional philosophy of communal sharing: "How can I return home alone?... What makes a home?... We shall all gather, go home together, light the fire together and build our home together. Those who eat alone, die alone" (6).

Matigari is the archetypal legendary national epic hero who is "cast as a deliverer of his people" (Okpewho 1979:126). He comes into the tale with an already established patriotic history, for his name indicates that he is the embodiment of all "the patriots who survived the bullets" of the Mau Mau war of independence and who had remained in the forests and mountains "to keep the fire of freedom burning" (20, 23, 37). It is in this capacity as the representative symbol of the patriotic fathers of the nation that Matigari claims kinship with all the people of Kenya, all of whom he calls "my parents, my wives, my children" (6). Except for the Kenyan compradoral elites, Matigari's antagonists who are depicted as monsters, his claims are also universally acknowledged especially by the children and the workers, whose leader rhetorically asks: "And whose family do you think we all are?" (23). Muriuki on his part firmly proclaims: "Yes. We are the children of Matigari ma Njiruungi. We are the children of the patriots who survived the war" (139, 144-45).

Matigari's identification with the worker is total. He asserts that "there is no job that these hands of mine have not done for the settler" (143). As the symbolic embodiment of all those who exploit the labor of workers, the settler is the antithesis of Matigari. As a figurative embodiment of the worker, Matigari variously represents himself as a

farmer, factory hand, driver, tailor, soldier (patriot), and builder (21-22, 38, 60, 74, 143). Most often he identifies himself not just with Kenyan peasants and workers and women alone, but also with peasants and workers and women everywhere. Once, he muses to himself: “For how long shall my children continue wandering, homeless, naked and hungry, over this earth? And who shall wipe away the tears from the faces of all the women dispossessed on this earth?” (88).

Matigari is thus not only a national hero, but also a class hero who has come to set aright “this world” that “is upside down” (150). “The human race,” Matigari asserts, “has the same roots.... It’s only that they have been dispersed by time and space into different camps” (146). The very first sentence of the novel, in fact, suggests the universal dimension of Matigari’s mission as a class hero by presenting him in the image of an armed warrior who for many years has looked “across many hills and valleys, in the four corners of the globe” (3).⁵ The Mau Mau patriot, who identifies the interest of the Kenyan nation with the interest of the dispossessed majority, is thus also the symbolic representative of the patriots of all nations. Rather than be diminished into the confines of a mere national hero, Matigari overrides the narrowness of ethnic chauvinism, the all-time bane of the world and to whose growth most national epic heroes have often blatantly contributed. In this way, Matigari is perhaps better classified with Beowulf than with Odysseus, and with Christ than with David.⁶

Matigari is aware of his role as a modern political hero; hence he consciously tries to distance himself from the usual agonistic tradition of national epics by burying his weapons. However, his attempt to substitute the weapons of peace—logical reasoning and persuasion—for the weapons

⁵ Matigari himself says: “I have wandered for far too many years in far too many places over the earth” (44).

⁶ Although a nationalistic ethos suffuses the narration of *Beowulf*, a fundamental difference still exists between its motivations and that of the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. While the Greek epics display the quest for personal and national glorification and aggrandizement, *Beowulf* is conceived as a journey to rescue an endangered kindred kingdom from a hitherto unconquerable monster. Thus, there is a degree of altruism that is present in one but lacking in the other. Similarly, while David fights for his nation, Christ fights for all humankind. This difference exists apart from the justice or the universal implication of David’s cause.

of war—brute force and firearms—fails, and he is compelled to revise his strategy (63, 160). To the extent that he makes this revision, he rejects the philosophy of non-resistance and of turning the other cheek, thus distancing himself in this respect from Christ. While he pursued his initial theory of peaceful change, he often appeared a naive ideologue and was frequently ridiculed and labeled a drunkard or a lunatic.⁷ On the other hand, whenever he displayed agonistic traits, he was perceived in the popular imagination as an authentic hero, such as when he confronted the two policemen who brutalized Guthera, or when he outwitted the combined forces of the army, the police, and the secret service agents and destroyed John Boy's house even as he escaped the shower of bullets aimed at him. Matigari then is a character who both reaffirms and revises our traditional concept of the hero.

As in all epic tales, Matigari has a set of formidable antagonists to confront. These antagonists naturally come from the camp of the bourgeoisie, whose interests are challenged by Matigari's championship of the proletariat cause. Matigari, in fact, is thrust into an unequal battle because the bourgeoisie constitute the powers-that-be and possess an awesome arsenal of coercive instruments ranging from the dictatorial monopoly of the media and super-efficient secret agents, to the control of school and university curricula, and on to the robotized minds of college professors, news media personnel, civil service executives, priests, judges, the police, and the army—a typical example of a contemporary African police state.

II. The Ogres

Just like the hero himself, Matigari's antagonists are represented in the magnifying mirror of the language of epic narrative. The duo, Mr. Williams and John Boy, are not merely the multinational representative and the local partner, respectively, of the Anglo-American Leather and Plastic Works, but a double-headed monster that has existed from colonial times in an eternal pact of peasant and worker exploitation. No sooner are the heads of these monsters chopped off than they immediately sprout new replacements. For instance, just when Matigari thinks that he has at last

⁷ See 17, 31-32, 39, 43, 44-45, 51, 61, 86, 123, 131-34, 158.

won the epic battle of the Mau Mau war that has lasted several years and ranged over uncountable forest and mountain battlefields with John Boy and Settler Williams, and emerges from the forest to celebrate this victory—just at that moment, Matigari discovers that the hydra-headed duo have been effectively replaced by John Boy Jr. and Mr. Williams Jr. To his chagrin, Matigari discovers that the new double-headed monster is even more formidable than the one he has recently dispatched.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Matigari and others speak of his antagonists in the language of myths and legends, calling them the “ogres currently running the country” (56). The chief ogre is the president—a disembodied omnipresent essence who ruthlessly eliminates all opposition to his dictatorship, using secret agents and informers like Giceru who trail their targets with remorseless efficiency. The ogres behave true to character in being absolutely and brutally inhuman in all their actions, whether at the individual or the official level. A typical example is the terror unleashed on the prostitute Guthera by two policemen whose sexual advances she has persistently rebuffed. The slaughter of protesting students, the banning of dreams, and the institution of a brand of terror called “instant justice” by the Minister of Truth and Justice are other instances.

More will be said below about Matigari’s antagonists when we discuss the theme of the ogres; meanwhile, what we have then in Matigari at the level of characterization is the transformation of a class war into the eternal battle of good and evil that is played out on an epic arena by larger-than-life characters. This epic enhancement both vivifies and immortalizes the otherwise mundane theme and characters. But after all, this is what all heroic narratives do: transform the ordinary into the extraordinary by the sheer force of art. The only difference in the case of Matigari is that the table has been turned on the traditional heroes and heroines of such epics. Members of the powers-that-be who used to be the favorites of the heroic songs are in this case the villains, because *Matigari* is a modern political tale whose purpose is to sanctify the battle of the social underclass for social justice by glorifying one of their leaders. Instead of “an aristocratic poem, concerned with kings and kingship,” as Raffel says of *Beowulf* (1963:x), we have a proletarian heroic narrative.

Epic Compositional Structure

I. The Opening Formula and the Triad

With a tripartite and episodic structure and as a multigeneric work with a framing principle of composition that formulaically links themes, *Matigari* can be seen as an ideal example of an oral epic narrative. The author's prefatory note, to which we have earlier drawn attention, should be recalled here for another reason, since it reveals Ngugi's fastidiousness in adhering to the details of the oral narrative composition. Such notes replicate the usual warm-up ritual that traditional storytellers engage in before commencing their tales, a ritual that ends up quite appropriately with the usual opening formula:

So say yes, and I'll tell you a story!
Once upon a time, in a country with no name....

However, unlike the traditional African bard who believed in the historicity of his legendary tales (Johnson 1986:45) and thus never had to worry about the institution of a libel case, Ngugi as a modern writer has to avoid legal entanglement by using another formula, this time one that belongs to the disclaimer tradition in written literature. Hence Ngugi insists that his story as well as its characters, actions, and temporal and geographical setting are all imaginary. The adroit combination of two opening formulas that belong to two different narrative traditions—oral and written—is a clear signal of Ngugi's intention to create an original modern epic. Among its other functions, then, and aside from the obvious aesthetic pleasure of its brilliant stylistic combination of diverse modes, the opening prefatory note is meant to indicate at least two things: one, that *Matigari* is an updated modern tale that remains faithful to the performative formulas characterizing African and other cultural traditional epics; and two, that it is a tale composed for oral reading.

The triad or trinity, a beloved folkloric and Biblical compositional and configurational device (Kelber 1983:66), is a prominent feature of *Matigari*, whose tripartite structural divisions are formulaically framed alike. The same sentence, cast in the form of a question with slight variations in diction, emphasis, and placement, is repeatedly used to conclude each of the three parts into which Ngugi's narration is divided.

Part one, for instance, ends thus: “Still the question remained: Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi?” (66). Part two closes with the same question: “But who was Matigari ma Njiruungi?” (127). The final third part adds a little elaboration: “Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi? Was he dead, or was he alive?” (174). The final chapter and conclusion of *Matigari*, which is three quarters of a page long, is virtually an epilogue showing the protagonist’s apotheosized disciple, Miriuki, transformed into the new Matigari ma Njiruungi (175). The formulaic sentence-question that ends each part of the tale also serves to reinforce the aura of mystery that perpetually surrounds the legendary Matigari. The mystery itself is a consciously repeated artistic motif designed to heighten interest in and elevate the mythic significance of Matigari as an epic hero.

II. Multiformity as Multigeneric Character

Virtually every critic who has written on *Matigari* has remarked on its multiformic or multigeneric character, what Katherine Williams refers to as “Ngugi’s use of mixed genres” (1991:61). A central characteristic of the epic in general is its multiformism. In Albert Lord’s usage, multiformity refers to the variations that exist within the transmission of a given epic song (and its constituent parts) as rendered in performance by the same or different bards. The variations appear as differences in the realization of a poetic line or lines, or changes in a poetic theme or motif with reference to content, details, or manner of composition (1960:99-123; esp. 101, 119-23). The sense in which I use the term multiform throughout this essay, on the other hand, is as a synonym of “multigenre,” that is, the quality or habit of an epic to incorporate other genres. The South Slavic “singer of tales” (oral epic poet), for instance, combines the music of the *gusle* with the recitation of measured lines (poetry) to constitute a song in performance. Furthermore, his narrative song is a collation of different “themes” as varied as the summoning of assembly, writing and dispatching a letter, ornamental description, catalogue, journey or the quest, and rescue.

In an epic tradition like that of Africa where there is as much emphasis on the bard’s tale as on its performance (Okpewho 1979:52-62), the epic exhibits even greater capacity for incorporating more genres. Thus, the African “singer of tales” is not only a musician-raconteur like the South Slavic *guslar*, but, according to Okpewho, “a musician-dancer-

raconteur” who speaks expressively with his body in performance (55-56). It also needs to be noted that the tale itself, which Albert Lord considers as the paramount element of the epic (1960:68), is often a mixture of factual history, myth, legend, anecdote, and other narrative genres.

Given all this, it is only to be expected that a knowledgeable and experimentalist artist like Ngugi, while writing an African epic in a postmodernist era, would maximally exploit the multiformic character of the genre to aesthetic advantage. Elsewhere I have discussed how Ngugi utilizes the epic multiformic principle as the basis of creating a new form of the novel;⁸ here we would merely identify the various genres that have been harmoniously woven into the structural fabric of *Matigari*. First of all, there are different kinds of narratives. The factual history of the Mau Mau patriotic war of Kenyan independence constitutes the foundation of the *Matigari* tale. The mythologizing of factual history is the common practice of oral tradition in which some factual “events take on ‘cosmic’ significance” (Keck 1978:117); thus, it is natural that from the Mau Mau history has sprung the legend of the invincible patriot, who has not only remained in the mountains to keep the metaphoric fire of independence burning, but would return to restore true independence if it is threatened. This legend is merged with the Christian myth of Christ’s second coming, all of which is dexterously fused in Ngugi’s tale of *Matigari*. Also integrated into this tale are other narratives such as the legend of Rip Van Winkle, the anecdote concerning the sexual promiscuity and religious hypocrisy of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice. Proverbs and parables abound, and there are aphorisms and riddles as well.

Performance, constituted from music, songs, dialogues, and mimicry, is an intrinsic part of the multiformic fabric of *Matigari*’s tale that moves with well managed dramatic intensity and excitement, both of which progressively heighten audience interest. Songs, whether recalling the past heroism of the Mau Mau patriots or spontaneously composed to celebrate *Matigari*’s present legendary exploits, often become the center of intense drama, particularly when they are combined with vivacious dialogues of excited and expressive crowds such as are witnessed in the second part of the novel. Here, *Matigari*’s so-called miracles undergo incremental exaggeration as they are retold, in fact reenacted, by one excited and gullible group for another. The more intense drama, however, is associated

⁸ See Balogun 1993:185-96.

with actions like the kind witnessed in the several confrontations between Matigari and the agents of the government. All of these actions lead to the dramatic build-up of the epic chase that culminates in the conflagration of John Boy's house, and the subsequent massive mob action and the arsons that follow.

Diverse other elements also become integral parts of the multiform constitution of Matigari's epic tale. Description, such as that of the hero's weapons, is strategically placed as a framing device at the beginning and end of the tale. When the descriptions are of persons, they promote the stereotyping of individuals, a traditional habit of oral narratives in preferring the flat to the rounded character (Kelber 1983:68-69, 71; Johnson 1986:6). Guthera's beauty, for instance, is hyperbolically emphasized to elevate her above ordinary women (27-28). Matigari's description serves the same purpose of stereotypical idealization, indeed reification, for each description adds to the legend of his mystery of being both young and old, a dwarf and a giant, an ordinary and a superhuman being, a reality and a dream.

At least fourteen radio broadcasts strategically punctuate the tale. These broadcasts both provide the parallel story of the actions of Matigari's antagonists (the powers-that-be) and supply satirical details to deflate them and transform them from flesh-and-blood, round characters into the stereotypes of villainous robots and ogres. There is etiology, such as the explanation of the origin of rain (53), and there is ritual and sacrifice (52-54, 57). And as the novel's critics are quick to point out, there are also borrowings from Hollywood films and from the traditions of the realistic novel.⁹

III. Prefabricated Formulary and Thematic Units

Critical opinions are unanimous in acknowledging oral narratives, especially the epic, as plotless in a literary sense, although this quality, as Walter Ong warns, should not be negatively apprehended since it was a virtue in pre-writing narration (1982:144). The epic prefers an "essential structural looseness of narrative composition" (Okpewho 1979:160) because the oral poet composes with what Ong, echoing Lord, calls "prefabricated"

⁹ Crehan 1993:123; Gikandi 1991:163-64, and 1992:139.

formulary parts (23) or, as Eric A. Havelock has claimed, simply because preliterate thought tends to be primarily episodic in structure (qtd. in Foley 1988:96). The so-called prefabricated units of composition employed by the epic bard are either phraseological or thematic in nature. Attention will be focused below on the phraseological; meanwhile, we will examine the thematic prefabs with respect to the tale about Matigari.

Although *Matigari* has a unified plot, which is compactly packed in three parts and three days of intense dramatic actions, close scrutiny easily reveals that it has actually been put together from an array of thematic prefabs. Themes, defined by Lord as “the group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (1960:68), operate in three distinct groups in *Matigari*. The first group is associated with Matigari, the epic hero; its members are often formulaically introduced or concluded. The second group of themes converges around Matigari’s antagonists, the ogres. There is a third group of themes that are not as singularly focused but are more diffusely linked with natural objects, animals, and human functions. Both the second and third groups, like the first, are often formulaically structured.

IV. Heroic Themes and Phraseology

We commenced our discussion of the compositional structure of *Matigari* by observing the fact that each of its three parts is formulaically framed with the question: “Who is Matigari?” This question highlights one of the most central and persistent themes of Ngugi’s narrative: the identity of Matigari. That Ngugi nowhere provides a conclusive answer to this question, which appears not only as a formula to close sectional divisions (66, 127, 174) but also at numerous points throughout the narration, constitutes one of the tale’s most forceful artistic devices. In fact, on it depends not only the story’s ability to retain interest, but more significantly, its capacity to sustain the characterization of Matigari as a superhuman hero. The device is thus one of the secrets to the mythologization of history discussed above, for the explanation that Matigari is a Mau Mau patriot who has recently returned from the mountains does not resolve the mystery of his superhuman attributes. Indeed, the closer the tale moves toward its end, the more the mystery and the questions surrounding Matigari’s identity multiply (158; cf. 170):

They all shared the same hope: that a miracle should take place.

But at the same time all wondered: who really was Matigari ma Njiruungi? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A saviour or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people's minds? Who Was He? (158; See also 170).

None of the details in this barrage of questions is frivolous because each of them has been motivated by the individual images of Matigari multiply grounded in the text. We have seen, for example, how his appearance mysteriously and repeatedly changes from youthfulness to old age, how he is alternately vulnerable and invulnerable, how he is capable and incapable of performing miracles, how he has the dual capacity to be both a national hero and an international class hero. And as for the reality of the character, the already cited author's prefatory note had warned us that his story's actions, characters, and setting are all imaginary and are located in the country, time, and space of the reader's choosing; in other words, all this is the "never-never-land" of the fairy tale of "Once upon a time..." (ix).

One unit from the other group of themes associated with the personality of Matigari concerns his image as the returned, long-absent hero who had stayed away in the mountains and whose patriotic intention is captured in the unchanging formula "to keep the fire of freedom burning" (20, 23). The quest theme, another example of the group, depicts Matigari as a wanderer who has forever restlessly been roaming the world in search of "truth and justice"—another repeated formula (89, 92; also 3, 5, 15, 44, 85, 71-114). The quest pattern is closely linked with another theme about Matigari's miraculous escapes and mysterious appearances especially during the period of his quest (71-114). Both units are announced formulaically: "He went to many market-places in search of truth and justice. People stood in groups talking..." (71); "He went to shopping centres. Everywhere, shopkeepers and their customers crowded..." (72); "He visited many eating places. People were so absorbed..." (74); "He went to the crossroads. Women returning from the river..." (75); "He went to the law courts. Those awaiting trial..." (80); "He travelled on foot. He rode on donkey carts. He got lifts on bicycles. He travelled in matatus, buses and lorries. He travelled by train..." (84-85); "Matigari came up to them and stood on the

veranda" (73); "Just then Matigari stopped on the other side of the road and greeted them..." (77); "Matigari just arrived, only to find a man speaking and pointing a finger in his direction" (82). Although the formulaic nature of the language of Matigari is a subject that will be discussed with greater scrutiny in a separate section below, the above examples should be noted as evidence of the fastidious care Ngugi took regarding the details of the composition and style of his novel. But even more important here than his general conscientiousness as an artist is the indication that Ngugi intentionally composed his tale using the "prefabricated" units of theme and phraseology in the precise manner of the oral poet.

Five other elements in the group of themes surrounding Matigari will now be summarized for the sake of brevity. One of these themes, which are also formulaically presented, concerns Matigari's habit of absentmindedly reaching for his weapons in moments of danger, only to remember that he has buried them and "girded himself with the belt of peace" (17, 30, 47). Another is the central theme of Matigari's struggle to repossess his "house" (which we have earlier identified as a symbol for the Kenyan nation) and return it to communal governance by dispossessing the exploiters like John Boy and Mr. Williams who had appropriated and ruthlessly ruled it with the ethics of selfish individualism (63, 124, 138, 144, 157, etc.). Closely associated with this pattern is the theme of fear, against which Matigari has made it his mission to do battle because "too much fear breeds misery in the land" (76-77, 87, 90-92, 112, 170-71).

The fourth theme is the traditional epic theme of the death of the substitute. The workers' leader Kiriro actually dies in the place of Matigari, while Guthera, the former prostitute who mysteriously disappears with Matigari into the river, ridden with bullets, had earlier sacrificed her long-kept vow that even as a prostitute she would not accept the patronage of any police officer. She broke this vow in order to make possible the release of Matigari from prison, a release which popular gossip credited as a miracle wrought by Angel Gabriel. Matigari's release from prison by Guthera and his second release from the mental hospital by Muriuki constitute the fifth theme—the traditional epic theme of the rescue of the hero. In fact, Guthera's rescue of Matigari from prison is a reciprocation for Matigari's earlier dramatic rescue of Guthera from the terror of police dogs. Matigari has similarly rescued Muriuki from being beaten up by a bigger boy. Thus, there is a cycle of reciprocity among the heroes and heroine as far as the rescue theme is concerned. This cycle of reciprocity

evidently encodes one of Ngugi's artistic messages, for it shows that only with courage, unity, and reciprocity of sacrifice could the exploited class win their battle against their exploiters.

V. Themes of the Ogre and the Double

The theme of the double is one of the major traits associated with Matigari's antagonists, who are depicted primarily as ogres and against whom Matigari the hero has constantly to battle. The battle against the ogres, typified by the epic struggle between Matigari and Settler Williams, is made all the more formidable because the ogres have multiple lives. To begin with, their protectors, the police, patrol the streets always in a unit of two and accompanied by a dog. The evil of which the police are capable is typified by the manner in which they use a vicious police dog to terrorize Guthera because she refuses to yield to their sexual advances. Not only are these policemen appropriately called "beasts" (31), but they are actually depicted in an image that makes them the interchangeable double of their animal through the deft choice of words accorded to an outraged citizen who exaggeratedly reports the incident: "He stood tall and strong and told the *dog police*: I am Matigari ma Njiruunigi, and I warn you. Leave that woman alone!" (60; emphasis added). Even children know the police and speak of them using the imagery of corruption and of the double: "The police station? Are you joking? What police? The police and these bandits work together. They are as inseparable as these fingers on my hand..." (14).

To show the greater level of the monstrosity of the ogres whom these policemen protect, a two-layered imagery of the double is employed. At the first level, there is the unity of the foreign exploiter and local collaborator represented by Settler Williams and John Boy, Snr. These two are depicted as the architects of the exploitation of African peasants and workers during colonialism. Consequently, to end colonialism meant that Matigari the patriotic hero had to defeat their double-headed unity in exploitation. The task took Matigari several years before it was successfully accomplished. The thematic formula that repeatedly registers this eventual victory is impressively imagistic: "It was only yesterday that... Settler Williams fell... He was dead. I placed my left foot on his chest and raised his weapons high in the air, proclaiming victory!" (22, 38, 58, 98).

A second layer is added to the imagery of the double when Matigari discovers his victory over John Boy and Settler Williams to be illusory:

We spent *many years* hunting one another in every corner of the land. I first killed John Boy. *It was only yesterday that I finally got Williams and stepped on his chest, holding up the weapons in victory.* The battle won, I decided to come home and claim my house. ‘Our people! Would you believe it? Who do you think I met standing at the gate to my house? John Boy’s son, and Settler Williams’ son! So it was Boy, son of Boy, who inherited the keys to my house!...’ (58-59; emphasis added).

With the monstrosity of the double of economic unity multiplied by the double of the ogres’ biological continuation, Matigari the patriot finds the task of ridding his land of the double yoke of internal and external exploitation an insurmountable task. The awesomeness of his task is presented to him by a worker whom he meets in prison:

That *inseparable* pair have been oppressing us all the time. Every worker knows that Robert Williams and John Boy are like twins born out of the womb of the same *ogre*. And do you know something else? The whole police force is in the hands of these two. So are all the law courts. (65; emphasis added)

Although acknowledging the inseparability of the duo of “a servant and his boss,” “the imperialist and his servant” (78, 79), meaning John Boy and Mr. Williams, Matigari remains undaunted. The imagery of the double is in fact additionally segmented not only in respect to the multiplicity of the personages involved—which in the European imagination brings to mind the mythical hydra and Hercules—but also in respect to the forces behind the unholy duality. The doubles unite to achieve protection against the consequences of their double corruptions: moral and economic. The twofaced behavior of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice is another graphic instance of this duality. On one hand, she hypocritically preaches on the radio to the whole nation the virtues of ideal womanhood; on the other hand, she is shamelessly licentious. When at last she is caught in the act, her lies are boldly and firmly backed by the full force of the law (150, 153).

The black Mercedes Benz that always appears in isolated spots in the wilderness is another motif recurrent throughout the novel (6, 7, 9, 16, 141-153). The car is not only the symbol of superfluous elite luxury, but also of

corruption. It is, for instance, the moving venue for the satisfaction of the sexual appetite of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice. It is paradoxical, then, that in a moment of poetic justice, this same car would become available to Matigari to use in order to escape police chase and would also later become the instrument by which Matigari would reach and destroy the prized house of John Boy.

Parrotology, another name for robotic sycophancy to dictatorial powers, is a prominent theme deployed as a satirical vehicle in *Matigari*. At its most obnoxious level, parrotology is depicted as associated with the intellectuals and the news media personnel, all of who make the reign of the ogres possible. There is a “Permanent Professor of the History of Parrotology,” a “Ph.d in Parrotology,” an “Editor of the Daily Parrotology,” and *Songs of a Parrot* (117, 119). But the most pervasive robotism is that of the national radio which eternally and nauseatingly begins every one of its fourteen adulatory broadcasts about the President, its only subject of news, with the unvaried formula: “This is the Voice of Truth.”¹⁰

VI. *Other Thematic Groups*

Of the third category of themes—those unassociated directly with either the hero or the ogre—three will be mentioned here because of their formulaic and symbolic significance. We have discussed the first, relating to the weather, in reference to its enhancement of the mystery surrounding Matigari’s heroic character. The weather not only sympathizes with and reflects the moods of the hero as noted above; it also often foreshadows the future. Just before Matigari would for the first time lay eyes on the house that proves a symbolic point of contention between him and John Boy, the weather displays the following character: “A red cloud enveloped the sun, but the sun continued to peep from behind it, sending out darts of fire in every direction” (42). Evidently, these “darts of fire” are warnings of the “ball of fire” that would begin the conflagration of the same house toward the end of the story (166).

The theme of a riderless horse that appears, among other places, on the first and last passages of the novel in conjunction with other framing

¹⁰ See 7, 26, 70, 83, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 151, 154.

devices such as the weapon description, is presented in exactly the same repeated formulaic phrases: "A riderless horse galloped past him. It stopped, looked back at him for a while and then disappeared into the woods" (3, 175). The exact symbolic meaning of this formulaically expressed theme is not quite clear; one can only speculate about its import. The brief exchange of looks perhaps exemplifies the understanding and communication between animals and patriots in the woods that Matigari claimed to have existed during the patriotic war (143). Thus, the horse might just be bidding goodbye to Matigari, who is departing the forest and welcoming Muriuku who has come to replace him. On another level, the emphasis on the word "riderless" might suggest the overthrow of Settler Williams, who like others in his class delighted in the pastime of riding horses to engage in the game of spilling blood. Indeed, Matigari recalls Mr. Williams in precisely these terms in the first passage.

The mugumo tree, among whose roots Matigari buries his weapons at the beginning of the novel, and from where his successor, Muriuki, digs them up at the end of the novel, is a symbolic image carried over from Ngugi's earlier works. On the first page of the present novel, the tree is parenthetically defined simply as "a fig tree" (3); however, earlier usages by Ngugi, especially in his novel *Weep Not, Child*, link the tree to Gikuyu creation myth. According to Lee Haring (1984), Ngugi's allusion to this myth through the use of the mugumo tree in *Weep Not, Child* was meant to emphasize Gikuyu ownership rights to their lands that had been appropriated by white settlers like Mr. Williams. Mythology tells that it was on the land under the mugumo that the Gikuyu ancestors had founded the Gikuyu nation, and hence the tree is regarded with reverence in Gikuyu mythology. Although Haring sees the influence of Christianity in Ngotho's definition of the mugumo as a tree of life (84), there is hardly any essential difference between that interpretation and the sacredness and reverence with which myths (Christian or non-Christian) treat lands of origin.

In the context of the struggle between Matigari and Settler Williams for ownership of the "house," that is, the Kenyan nation, it is evident that the succinct but repeated allusion to the mugumo is a significant detail. It underscores Matigari's claim to ownership of the house/land to which Mr. Williams (appropriately assigned the honorific "Settler Williams") is in truth a stranger. It is not accidental that Matigari does not hide his weapons under just any tree, but carefully seeks out the mugumo: "Then suddenly he saw what he was looking for: a huge mugumo, a fig tree, right in the

middle of a cluster of other trees” (3). The emphasis on the tree’s age through reference to its size is meant to underline its link with myth and ancestry. It should similarly be noted that not once does Matigari entertain fears concerning the safety of his weapons placed in the protective custody of the mugumo, a confidence that is fully justified when Matigari’s broad directions lead Muriuki to the weapons as surely as if he had kept them there himself. Evidently, the ancestors had sanctified Matigari’s cause, and hence the confident assurance of ultimate victory expressed in the song that Muriuki remembers as he stands—significantly—under the mugumo at the end of the novel.

VII. Framing Device, Digression, and Ring Composition

At least nine framed stories are narrated in *Matigari* in the ornamental, digressive manner of the traditional epic. The stories may be called ornamental because they do not belong to the main story line. Most frequently, the framed story is presented through the device of ring composition by which epic narrators neatly bracket off their ornamental narrative insertions. A typical example of the framed story in *Matigari* is the history of Guthera. In the characteristic epic formulary manner, this story is repeated almost word for word on two separate occasions (33-37 and 94-97). But for the necessity to adhere to the epic formulary use of prefabricated units, Guthera’s story could have merely been paraphrased in a few sentences the second time it had to be told, but in fact it is recounted in exactly the same details and wording as happened during the first time it was narrated.

On each of the two instances, for instance, the story is recounted as an illustrative digression to an ongoing conversation. The first time, the conversation is interrupted with the following words that serve to introduce the tale: “First let me tell you a story...” (33). On the second occasion, the conversation is disturbed with the phrase: “Let me unload on you a burden which is weighing heavily on me” (94). The story begins every time with a version of the opening formula for the traditional tale: “Long ago, there was a virgin...” (33) and “Long ago, there was a young woman. She was the purest of maids...” (94). Also on each occasion, the story is told from the third-person point of view despite the fact that on the first of those occasions Guthera herself is the narrator of her own story. This device is

purposely employed because withholding information about the identity of the story's protagonist helps to sustain the interest of the audience. The story is followed each time by resumption of the initially interrupted conversation.

Like all the other stories presented through the device of ring composition, Guthera's story is a digression, but one that has relevance to the issue at hand. While Guthera narrates the story the first time to Matigari, her new friend and protector, in order to acquaint him with both her personal history and her present predicament, Matigari in turn dramatically retells it in the court as damning evidence of political corruption and class exploitation in Kenya. The phrase "the eleventh commandment" (37, 95) is formulaically repeated on each of the two occasions when Guthera's story is told. This phrase is her private ethical code that serves as a reminder of her decision never to provide her services as a prostitute to any policeman. She made this decision because of the treacherous role of the police in the death of her father, who was caught smuggling weapons to the Mau Mau patriots during the war of independence. The formula also reveals her disenchantment with organized religion.

As might be expected, Matigari's story provides the most elaborate example of a repeated use of ring composition. The story of the cause, character, and conclusion of his protracted battle with Settler Williams is retold on at least four different occasions (38, 57-59, 97-98, 113-14). The judicious spread of the placement of the repetition within the novel is noteworthy. Whether the story is elaborately narrated for emphasis as in the second occasion of its telling, or abbreviated in paraphrases employed to support an ongoing argument as in the three other examples, the story is vividly and dramatically presented, and it begins unfailingly with only slightly modified variations of the same formula:

It was now Matigari's turn to tell Guthera his story: how he had cleared the bush; how he had cultivated and sowed; and how later he had built a house. And all this time Settler Williams had strolled about with his hands in his pockets... (38).

Matigari began speaking, like a father to his children. "I lived on a farm stolen from me by Settler Williams. I cleared the bush, tilled the soil, sowed the seeds and tended the crop..." (57-58).

Let me tell you yet another riddle concerning him-who-sows and him-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed. He-who-sows cleared the bush, cultivated the land, flattened it, sowed and tended the crop. He-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed grabbed the land... (97).

My story is made up of you and me. I built house. I cultivated the land. I worked the industry. But Settler Williams, aided by his servant, John Boy, ended up with all the wealth... (113-14).

Beside showing the application of formulaically composed framed stories, the above examples also reveal Ngugi to be a painstaking, masterful craftsman who pays meticulous attention to the slightest details of his craft. Since this repeated story is placed at judicious distances apart, a less conscientious writer who is more concerned with the form than with the aesthetics of the form would have merely repeated the story each time word-for-word. Ngugi, on the other hand, carefully balanced the first and third person points of view, as well as varied the length, pace, emphasis, tone, and diction of the story at each instance of its repetition. Although discussion of the epic linguistic formulas of *Matigari* is reserved for the next section of this article, we cannot but note here the elaborate and intriguing application of the descriptive epithets “he-who-sowed” and “he-who-reaped-where-he-never-sowed.” Since these epithets are used as a naming device and are repeated throughout the novel by application to the same set of individuals, they can also be regarded as fixed epithets.

The device of ring composition is also used with the same careful craftsmanship to weave into the larger narrative fabric of *Matigari* the story of Muriuki’s mother’s brutal murder by arson (25), Muriuki’s dream (155), a worker’s story recounted in prison (59-61), the story of John Boy’s education (48-49, 102), the philosophical tale about the leopard and the hare (112), the tale about an archer and truth (62), the legend of Rip Van Winkle (118), and the myth about the Ogre (131).

Each of the ringed compositions analyzed or mentioned above momentarily diverts attention from the main plot of *Matigari*, but in doing so, it also provides a fresh insight or emphasis for a deeper understanding of the major plot. Consequently, each diversion is a creative digression that both diverts attention from but ends up advancing the main story. These are exactly the functions of ring composition in African oral epics.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. Okpewho 1979:194-201.

VIII. *Coincidences and Deus ex Machina*

While realistic fiction frowns on the intrusion of extraneous forces into the natural development of a novel's plot, oral narratives are inconceivable without such intrusions. Indeed, heroic characterization depends for its realization precisely on the intervention of the supernatural. *Matigari* amply demonstrates this characteristic. For instance, the careful detailing of the earlier appearances of the black Mercedes Benz in the wilderness is Ngugi's attempt to realistically motivate the appearance of this car at exactly that moment towards the end of the story when Matigari needs it for his attempted escape. In spite of this careful artistic labor, the availability of the car at that crucial turning point remains suspect. The paradox, however, is that Ngugi did not need to labor to clothe the appearance of the car in the apparel of normalcy or reality. Given the overwhelming details in the characterization of Matigari as a legendary hero, coincidences such as the mysterious appearance of the car become the expected, the normal, the realistic.

Matigari's mysterious escape through the window from the inferno of John Boy's house, his remaining unscratched by even a single bullet when the combined forces of the police and the army's sharp shooters target torrents of gunfire and explosives at him, the sudden intervention of a heavy rain at the nick of time to prevent the capture of Matigari and Guthera, their mysterious disappearance (indeed, apotheosis) at the end of the novel, and the transformation of the mere child Muriuki into Matigari—all these, and many more, are expected and normal interventions within the context of the mythologization of Matigari as the embodiment and contemporary evocation of Mau Mau history.

Epic Linguistic and Stylistic Formulas

That *Matigari* is a consciously wrought epic narrative is nowhere as evident as in the proliferation and artistic deployment of elements that traditionally characterize the language and the style of the epic tale. Abounding throughout *Matigari* are devices such as the fixed epithet, formulaic expressions, the catalog, progressive duplications, double or triple

repetitions, rhetorical questions, exclamatory statements, apostrophe, dialogue, parallelism, and rhythmic sentences and passages.

The formulary epic principle is most evident in *Matigari*'s diction and syntax, especially in the earlier sections of the narrative. Thoughts, for instance, are strung together in "additive, rather than subordinative" and "aggregative rather than analytic" sentences, a syntactic pattern that Ong has perceptively identified as typifying the mode of oral traditional composition (1982:37-39). This paratactic or adding syntax, which Lord has also cited as the source of the predominance of parallelism in epic narratives (1960:54-57), exists in profusion in *Matigari*, as is evident in the following illustration that constitutes section 2 of part one of the novel (1987:5-6):

He climbed up and down yet other hills and mountains;	1
crossed many other valleys and rivers; trekked through	2
many fields and plains: moving with determination	3
towards the heart of the country. The sun shone	4
brightly. He took off his coat, carried it over his	5
shoulder and strode on, the sun shining directly into	6
his face. But he still did not waver or look back.	7
Black-eyed Susans and other weeds clung to his clothes	8
as though welcoming him back to the fields. He was	9
sweating. So much heat! So much dust! What trials	10
one had to endure on this earthly journey! But there	11
was no arrival without the effort of moving feet.	12
He tried to visualise his home. In his mind's eye	13
he could see the hedges and the rich fields so clearly.	14
Just another climb, the final climb, and then he would	15
be home—his home on top of the hill!	16
His feet felt heavy. He decided to rest for a while.	17
He laid his coat on the ground and sat on it in the	18
shade, leaning back against the tree. He removed his	19
hat, placed it on his left knee and wiped his brow with	20
his right hand. His hair was a fine mixture of black	21
and grey. His brow had creased with fatigue. He yawned	22
drowsily. How could it be so oppressively hot so early?	23
He dozed off. His thoughts took flight. How can I	24
return home all alone? How can I cross the threshold	25
of my house all alone? What makes a home? It is the	26
men, women and children—the entire family. I must	27
rise up now and go to all the public places, blowing	28
the horn of patriotic service and the trumpet of	29
patriotic victory, and call up my people—my parents,	30

my wives, my children. We shall all gather, go home	31
together, light the fire together and build our home	32
together. Those who eat alone, die alone. Could I	33
have forgotten so soon the song we used to sing?	34
Great love I saw there,	35
Among the women and the children.	36
We shared even the single bean	37
That fell upon the ground.	38
He started and woke up. He put on his hat and picked	39
up his coat, which he once again carried over his right	40
shoulder.	41
An irresistible urge to go and just peep at his house	42
gnawed at him, but he fought against it. He had made up	43
his mind. He would first go in search of his people; at	44
least first find out where they lived, what they ate and	45
drank and what they wore. So many traps, oh so many	46
temptations, in the way of the traveller on this earth!	47

Instead of a mixture of simple, complex, and compound sentences, the above passage, which I have numbered in lines to facilitate reference, consists primarily of a succession of simple sentences that begin with the third-person masculine personal pronoun either in the subjective form “he” or in the possessive “his.” The passage consequently moves in rhythmic waves of predictable syntactic units; lines 17-23 are the most graphic in this respect. A similar example of the use of parallel and rhythmic sentences derived from the repetitive occurrence of the personal pronouns “his,” “he,” “me,” and “we” is seen with greater variation in the following passage:

“He did not.... He quickened his pace.... His heart beat wildly. Let me hurry.... Let me tell them.... We shall all go home together. We shall enter the house together. We shall light the fire together...” (10).

As this passage shows, the rhythmic movement of the pages of *Matigari* is also a consequence of the frequent use of the device of parallelism, which is created by the repetitive deployment of a variety of linguistic arrangements.

In lines 1-4 of the numbered text quoted above, for instance, parallelism is built on the recurrence of the same pattern of verbal phrases centered on the four verbs “climbed,” “crossed,” “trekked,” and “moving.” A similar scheme is repeated with variation in lines 31-33, where there is

once again a four-unit verbal phrase repetition, each unit of which ends on a rhyme built on “gather” and “together.” In lines 39-40, another variation on the same pattern can be observed. Not only do the two sentences constituting the parallelism end on a near-rhyme (“woke up” and “picked up”), but each of the two sentences is internally balanced with the use of a coordinating conjunction: “started and woke” and “put on... and picked up...”

Repetition is the most common device used to produce rhythmic passages and parallelism in *Matigari*, as the passages quoted above amply demonstrate. The repetition often exceeds the traditional doubling as in the phrase “Oh, a long, long time ago” (15) and extends to a triple or quadruple multiplication like the following one: “They walked and walked and walked down the slope, but they were...” (41). The word “no” is the structural cornerstone of the following three parallel sentences: “No wind blew. No leaves rustled. No clothes fluttered anywhere” (40). When Guthera tries to seduce Matigari on the occasion of their very first meeting (28-29), the word “or” is used by Guthera eleven times, and in six out of those eleven times, it is the initial word of sentences cast as questions.

As the numbered passage quoted above shows, the linguistic structure of repetition in *Matigari* is varied. It can result from the use of the same unchanged linguistic unit, as in lines 13 and 16 where the phrase “his home” is repeated; or one element could be varied within the repeated unit, as in line 15 where one of the adjectives modifying the noun “climb” is changed: “another climb” and “the final climb.” The same pattern is at work in the phrase “blowing the horn of... and the trumpet of...” in lines 28-29, as well as in the relative clauses “where they lived, what they ate and drank and what they wore” in lines 45-46. The variation in the combination of article + noun + verb + adverb in lines 4-5 and 6 is similar: “the sun shone brightly” and “the sun shining directly....” The repetition in line 27 and 30-31 consists of two lists of nouns—“men, women and children” and “my parents, my wives, my children.”

The use of the list or what Lord calls a “catalogue” (1960:96) is a beloved device of epic poets. It is often quite elaborate in its enumeration of the class or classes of objects or actions being listed. Considering the length of the entire narrative, the catalogues in *Matigari* are impressive, even though they are nowhere as extensive as the catalogues of warriors, lords, and other characters assembled in council or engaged in battle or some other related activities in such epics as the ancient Greek *Odyssey* or

Iliad, the South Slavic *Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, or the Malian *Sunjara*. Some of the catalogues in *Matigari* include the listing of the types of cars in the “vehicle cemetery” that has been converted into living quarters by abandoned children in Kenya (15). The enumeration of the menu at the “Mataha Hotel, Bar and Restaurant” is another (23). The commandments are all listed, plus Guthera’s own personal eleventh commandment (34-36). The list of Africa’s former colonial masters and of multinational companies is given (45, 50). A roll of those arrested and the reasons for their arrest is similarly supplied (54-54). The most elaborate catalogue enumerates the means of transportation that Matigari used and the places and persons he visited in his search for truth and justice throughout the land (84-100).

The repeated exclamatory statement, cast in the syntax of parallelism, also abounds in *Matigari*. Successive exclamatory sentences, two of them parallel, appear, for instance, in lines 10-11 of the passage quoted above: “So much heat! So much dust! What trials one had to endure on this earthly journey!” The religious allusion in this last exclamation also finds an echo in the final sentence of the passage, another exclamatory phrase: “So many traps, oh so many temptations in the way of the traveller on this earth!” (lines 46-47). This last sentence, like the first three, combines multiple characteristics; it is exclamatory, allusive, and internally constituted as parallelism with the help of repetition. Moreover, the strategic placement of allusive and rhythmic exclamatory sentences at the end of the first and last paragraphs of this brief second sectional division of part one of the novel gives the device of exclamation a formulary and unifying force as a frame. The brevity of this second sectional division is also characteristic of the whole novel, which moves with the fast rhythm of multiple short narrative waves.

Rhetorical questions, also often cast in the rhythmic movement of the parallel syntax, are as frequent as exclamatory sentences in *Matigari*. The uninterrupted succession of rhetorical questions in the passage quoted above in lines 23-26 and the conclusion of the two successive paragraphs ending on lines 23 and 34 in the same short text amply demonstrate the truth of this claim. Apart from adding to the rhythmic movement of thought, rhetorical questions often underscore the ideological question of social inequality whose rectification constitutes the essence of Matigari’s mission as a class hero. Early in the narrative, as Matigari observes two policemen, a tractor driver, and two men—all in a morally compromising act—he expresses his perplexity in two parallel rhetorical sentences: “So these five were busy

dividing among themselves the money they had taken from the children? So a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of the many being the joy of the few?" (12). With even greater intensity and concentration, a barrage of rhythmic, rhetorical questions in section eleven of part two of *Matigari* (85-86) becomes the instrument for underscoring the necessity of raising the question of morality in the governance of human beings, particularly with reference to determining what constitutes the understanding of truth and justice.

The aphoristic beauty of much of the text of *Matigari* derives from the appropriateness with which its numerous proverbs are deployed to express thought. In the brief passage above, proverbs occur twice, each time as the conclusion of a paragraph: "But there was no arrival without the effort of moving feet" (lines 11-12) and "Those who live alone, die alone" (line 33). The internal parallelism ("live alone" and "die alone") of the second example is noteworthy as evidence of the concurrent application of multiple devices to accentuate the aesthetic quality of *Matigari* as a narration. The proverb is used in *Matigari* not as a trait that distinguishes characters, since it is employed by both the hero and the ogres, but as the common linguistic property of all the people of a given culture, both good and bad. The major difference is the purpose for which an individual employs a proverb. In the examples cited above, proverbs serve positive goals. In the first instance, the existential wisdom of a culture is summoned as a source of encouragement to an individual who is facing the difficulties of life. The second proverb promotes the traditional African cultural concept of community, the continued erosion of which *Matigari* as a cultural hero wishes to stem.

In the world of epic narration, where mystery is a necessary instrument in the mythologization of the hero, the device of personification has always been favored. Lines 8 and 9 of the passage above provide a typical example where "Black-eyed Susans and other weeds clung to his [Matigari's] clothes as though welcoming him back to the fields." Earlier we have discussed how nature sympathizes with and reflects Matigari's mood and also foreshadows future events.

As Lord pointed out for the South Slavic *guslar* (1960:42), chiasmic syntax is another favored device of the oral bard who, much like our modern self-conscious artists, justifiably delighted in his or her mastery of the technicalities of using and arranging words for special effects. The sentence "Just another climb, the final climb, and then he would be

home—his home on top of the hill!” (lines 15-16; emphasis added) is an instance of the several uses of this device in *Matigari*. Also in section 7 of part one, Matigari speaks to his listeners, saying “But all the gains went to Settler Williams. *What a world! A world* in which the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter” (21; emphasis added). The chiasmus built on the words “home” and “world” in these two examples serves the purpose of emphasis. We have noted the fact that aesthetic beauty in *Matigari* is often enhanced by Ngugi’s preference for concurrent multiple application of artistic devices. The simultaneous deployment of repetition and parallelism in the two cited instances of chiasmus provides another typical example.

The most easily recognizable epic formula in *Matigari* is the noun-epithet phrase. Lines 29-30 of the passage we have been analyzing yield a classical illustration within the following formulaic expression: “blowing the horn of *patriotic service* and the trumpet of *patriotic victory*” (emphasis added). While the italicized phrases are occasional, most such combinations in *Matigari* belong to the category of the fixed or stock epithets because they repeatedly appear throughout the narrative in exactly the same or slightly varied combinations. For example, it is always “Settler Williams,” “His Excellency Ole Excellency,” “Minister for Truth and Justice,” “Giceru the informer” or the “Hooded Truth,” “Madam the Minister’s Wife,” “He-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed,” and, of course, it is always “Matigari ma Njiruungi—The patriot who survived the bullets.”

It is evident from these examples that in most cases the epithetic phrases are deployed as instruments of satire to pejoratively identify or characterize Matigari’s antagonists. More than any other device, they underscore the agonistic or aggressive nature of the ideological debate in *Matigari*. The pejorative phrases actually mirror the negative political clichés of African politics that Ong has associated with the “residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes” (1982:38). Understandably, there are certain groups of readers who object on ideological grounds to the use of the pejorative epithets. However, those who object on aesthetic grounds to the profusion of the pejorative epithets would do well to remember that such profusion or redundancy of formulary application has been identified as a typical characteristic of the traditional oral epic.¹²

¹² See Ong 1982:39-41.

Epic Setting

The most obvious quality of setting as a geographical and temporal device in *Matigari* is its ambiguity. Ngugi wants this device, like all others in the narrative, to contribute to his mythologization of history; consequently, he provides conflicting signals that make the setting ambivalent. The prefatory note to which we have earlier referred indicates that the story has “no fixed time” and “no fixed space” and invites the reader/listener to locate the action of the story in a place and time of his or her choice. On the other hand, certain details of the story—especially the names of characters (Guthera, Muriuki, Ngaruro wa Kiriro), the historical etymology of such names as Settler Williams and Matigari ma Njiruungi, and the names of trees such as the mugumo—are meant to locate the story decidedly in Kenya and to evoke the political history of that country. At the same time, Ngugi also consciously denies the story’s geographical and temporal specificities by locating them in mythic time and space, and by giving objects mythic dimensions. The hero is sometimes depicted as associated with the “four corners of the globe” (3, 44, 63). John Boy’s house of contention is said “to stretch out for miles, as if, like the plantation itself, it had no beginning and no end” (42). Not only does this kind of setting enhance the depiction of Matigari, as stated earlier, as both a Kenyan cultural hero and a universal class hero; it also creates the aura of mystery required to create the image of a larger-than-life character.

The social aspect of setting in *Matigari* is by contrast palpably real, not in the sense of being totally believable, but rather visible, identifiable. On one side are Matigari and his followers, and on the other side are located the hero’s antagonists, the ogres. In between and around both are the masses of the people, some of whom Ngugi has depicted as actively involved in the performative moments of the present story. Indeed, the most dramatic instances are precisely those occasions when the story as a performance has been taken over by its inscribed audience. One of these moments is particularly noteworthy. Part two of the novel tells the story of Matigari as it circulates with incremental exaggeration among the common folk, many of whom, while retelling the story with freshly added details, would warm up so enthusiastically to their narration that they would spontaneously burst out into song and dance. This section of the novel is rendered almost entirely in the lively conversations and debates by ordinary men and women

who at times take delight in using their participation as an occasion to pleurably tease one another in the characteristic fashion of daily life. Highly typical of this section of the novel is the following conversation (77):

“Such wonders! I wish I had been there to see him and shake his hands, or sing him a song like the one the people of Trampville composed!

Show me the way to a man
Whose name is Matigari ma Njiruungi,
Who stamps his feet to the rhythm of bells.

And the bullets jingle.
And the bullets jingle.”

“You mean sing while holding him to your breasts,” one of them said slyly.
They laughed.
Just then Matigari stopped on the other side of the road and greeted them....

Another of the dramatic instances of performative takeover of events by the audience occurs after John Boy’s house has been set on fire. The event triggered the songs spontaneously composed by the people and the widespread arson that followed and that was the handiwork of Matigari’s followers, especially the children who live with Muriuki in the “vehicle cemetery.”

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion above that *Matigari* has been executed both comprehensively and competently as an oral narrative performance. What is more, in *Matigari* oral narrative devices do not merely serve the exhibitionistic display of an expert knowledge of artistic technicalities, but a purposeful goal—that of making literary art perform its traditional functions of education and entertainment by returning it to its original mode: oral narrative performance. A flattering indication of Ngugi’s artistic success is the fact that barely four months after the publication of *Matigari*, its hero had so effectively entered Kenyan social consciousness that this phantom was mistaken for a living Kenyan and orders were issued by the government for his arrest (viii). Thus, if *Matigari* were “only” an

oral narrative performance, it would be a great work of art, but as stated earlier, it is also a successful literary multigenre.

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Choices of Honor: Telling Saga Feud, *Tháttir*, and the Fundamental Oral Progression

Jesse L. Byock

The transition from a semiotic system of textual comprehension to a system of internal structural boundaries constitutes the basis for the generation of meaning. This condition, above all, intensifies the moment of play in the text: from an alternative mode of codification the text acquires features of a more sophisticated conventionality.

(Lotman 1994:380)

The family and Sturlunga sagas are not only narratives of “sophisticated conventionality,” but it is precisely the unclear combination of mundane and refined that has made these medieval texts so hard to classify.¹ On the one hand the sagas are a sophisticated written phenomenon. On the other, they are stories filled with repetitions and other conventions of oral, ethnographic narration recounting the social past. Can we determine the elemental, generative structure of the Icelandic texts? The answer is yes, since the sagas themselves, despite their overlay of sophistication, retain this primary repetitive progression. With our question in mind, let us look at just such a progression.

Toward the middle of *Vápnfirðinga saga*² is a small *tháttir* (short story)³, relating a petty dispute with large implications for the people involved. Two farmers, each a thingman of a different local chieftain, quarrel over grazing and tree-cutting rights in a woodland they own in

¹ This article expands a preliminary study (Byock 1994) published in Iceland. My thanks are due to the editor of *Oral Tradition* for his interest in the essay.

² *Vápnfirðinga saga* in Jóhannesson 1950; for bibliography, see Cook 1993.

³ The plural of *tháttir* is *thættir*.

common. Up to this point the two *bændr* (farmers)⁴ have shared the use of the property, but now one of them, Thórðr, is threatened by his more aggressive and wealthier neighbor Thormóðr.⁵ Intimidated by Thormóðr, Thórðr seeks support. As is the custom, the free farmer goes to his *goði*⁶ Brodd-Helgi and asks the chieftain's help in solving the problem.

But the *goði*, the head of one of the two major families in the saga, is a hard man. Brodd-Helgi refuses to help his thingman Thórðr unless the latter hands over all his property and comes to live on the chieftain's farm. The saga makes this point clearly:

Brodd-Helgi declared that he had no intention of quarreling over his [Thórðr's] property and would take no part in the matter, unless he [Thórðr] transferred to him all the property and moved everything of his to Hof [Brodd-Helgi's farm].

Brodd-Helgi kvask eigi nenna at deila um fé hans [Þórðar] ok engan hlut mundu í eiga, nema hann handsalaði honum féit allt ok færi til Hofis með allt sitt (ch. 7).⁷

Caught in a dilemma, Thórðr accepts Brodd-Helgi's offer and legally assigns his patrimony to the chieftain: "He [Thórðr] chose that and surrendered to Helgi his inheritance." (Hann [Þórðr] kaus þat ok seldisk Helga arfsali.)

Later in the saga the reason for including this seemingly unimportant incident becomes clear. The dispute over the woodland merges into an ongoing conflict between two chieftains, Brodd-Helgi and his rival Geitir Lýtingsson, who champions Thormóðr's position. The incident is a step in

⁴ The singular of "farmer" is *bóndi*.

⁵ Alas for the non-Icelandic readers of the sagas, a large proportion of the names in the Icelandic texts are Thórr names, a tradition that finds its roots in a connection with Þórr, the god of farmers.

⁶ Chieftain. The plural of *goði* is *goðar*.

⁷ *Vápnfirðinga saga*, in Jóhannesson 1950:38.

the escalation of the saga's major feud,⁸ a contest between two local "big men," each of whom illustrates different personal behavior and leadership style.⁹ As the purpose of including the episode of the two *bændr* is clearly to advance the main feud, neither Thórðr's personal tragedy nor his motivation is explored. In fact, the saga shows little interest in the character of Thórðr; instead, it focuses on the role this incident plays in a chain of events eventually leading to the death of the overly ambitious Brodd-Helgi.

In terms of the saga's basic structure, the conflict between the two farmers sets in motion a series of actions, which we find repeated throughout the sagas, and which are recognizable as a distinct narrative story. In the sagas, many such *thættir* (short stories) are worthy of investigation.¹⁰ The episodic *tháttir* at hand is a primary structure in saga narration of dispute and feud set at home in Iceland. It shoulders the burden of directing the narrative, that is channeling the escalation of events, especially the contentious relationships of Icelandic farmers (men, women, and children) and their chieftains. This pattern serves as an essential building block of saga story. Here I consider this primary structure in a semiotic mode, abstracting the conflict as it moves from a dispute between farmers to a feud between chieftains. My goal is to provide a means for loosening the Gordian knot of saga studies, the convergence of social and literary norms.

By designing tools to analyze the basic grammar of saga narrative, we advance two studies: that of the narrative and that of the society. The primary building blocks of saga structure are small, discrete particles of action. These active particles are easily visualized and hence easily held in

⁸ Although it may seem rather late in the game, the general realization that feud forms the "bedrock" of early Icelandic society and literature is only now gaining wide acceptance. See for example Vésteinn Ólason's (1993) excellent summary article on the family sagas. Helgi Thorláksson (1994) offers a major reconsideration of the role of feud in early Iceland, including a critical review of previous scholarship treating saga feud.

⁹ For a discussion of this long feud see "Vinfengi: A Mechanism of Power" (Byock 1988: ch. 10). The operation of Icelandic feud in general is explored in Chapter 6, "Consensual Governance."

¹⁰ Harris 1972, Ólason 1985, Egilsdóttir 1982. Previous structural analysis of *thættir* has concentrated principally on the numerous short stories of the journeys of Icelanders abroad, especially to the princely courts of Scandinavia.

mind. They may be represented symbolically and pictorially, as I do later in this article.¹¹ Reducing the action particles to their most abstract level, stripping them of names, places, and details, reveals the fundamental simplicity of saga form. Structurally, there is only a limited number of actions that the sagateller draws upon. The initial scene—even one as seemingly small and insignificant as the confrontation between farmers Thórðr and Thormóðr—has far-reaching consequences: it directs the progression of the elaborate feud to follow. This progression resembles a flowchart. Each choice presents another dilemma, necessitating that a new choice must be made before the action can move forward. Following the choices is something that I do not think has been done before but is a method that provides much insight into the social, narrative, and intellectual processes of medieval Iceland. As manifestations of culture, the sagas are a consequence of the combined mentalities of sagateller and medieval audience. Just how the related processes of creation and reception worked is the crucial issue.

With this in mind, I illustrate a small section of the major feud chain in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. Each step, critical to the progression of the unraveling story, may be diagrammed very simply. Although the saga must move relentlessly forward, the sagateller in each instance draws on the same underlying elements of advocacy, conflict, and resolution. The actions are simple, basic, few, and easily visualized. It is not by chance that they fit so easily together to form the narrative structure of feud tales. Saga narration is an example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts: small oral narrative elements are linked together by the logic of Icelandic feuding into a complex chain of events suitable as written narration.¹²

¹¹ I have explored aspects of these action particles elsewhere. In Byock 1982, I referred to them as *feudemes*. See especially the analogy of feudemes with linguistic terminology (57-60). As their name suggests, the role of these particles in feud is similar to the role of morphemes in language. The feudeme forms a relatively stable, indivisible unit of action within the context of both saga and society. These discrete action particles and their patterned groupings are the oral narrative elements upon which the structure of the later written saga is based.

¹² In the sagas, silence can also be a narrative “instrument.” Cf. Österberg 1991. Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir (1990) considers the place of verse in the mainly prose sagas. The twelfth-century transition to literacy, in light of the political competition between lay and clerical leaders, is explored in Sigurðsson 1994.

Consider again Thórðr's small, sad story. The saga has little to say about the background of his troubles or the motivations of the people involved. Instead, basic action is tersely described in a few sentences. Here is a core social pattern, one that, with different variations, structured episodic *thættir* throughout the sagas. In some sagas, such narrative units are embroidered with portents, local history, genealogy, connivings, ghosts, and killings, but the episode of farmer Thórðr and his lost land has no such embellishments. It is cut to the bare bones, exposing the elemental configuration of incidents, progressing from stability, proceeding through disruption, and arriving at temporary resolution. The word "temporary," of course, is the key to building long saga narrative from such a rudimentary progression.

The individual actions and their patterned arrangement serve as a system of signs, channeling the teller/author's prose and fixing the audience's attention. They triggered the rich social understanding that the medieval listener/reader shared with the sagateller. This vital, semantic contract between sagateller and audience dominates saga narration, maintaining the element of oral tradition in the text and furnishing the sagas as a genre with their characteristic sense of homogeneity.

The modern reader might simply see a beleaguered man seeking protection. The medieval audience, however, knowing that Thórðr's options are limited, considered his choices. If Thórðr should reject the chieftain's offer, he chances losing his life to his bullying neighbor. By handing over his land to a *goði*, the farmer gains the immediate protection of a powerful advocate. Yet, in doing so, Thórðr loses his autonomy and the status—both for himself and for his heirs—that come with being a landholder.

Honor, as it so often does in the sagas, invigorates the issue of choices, providing an intellectual as well as an emotional bridge between otherwise patterned and repetitive social actions.¹³ Here, in the bargain between *goði* and *bændr*, honor plays a crucial background role.¹⁴ The medieval audience would surely note, and probably comment upon, Thórðr's small victory, for if this poor farmer loses his land, he

¹³ In a fine article (1986), Richard Bauman considers honor in the sagas in light of performance.

¹⁴ There are different ways to look at honor in the sagas and the view presented here is at times at odds with more traditional concepts of saga morality, honor, and ethics. Vilhjálmur Árnason (1991) offers a philosophical discussion of these differing views.

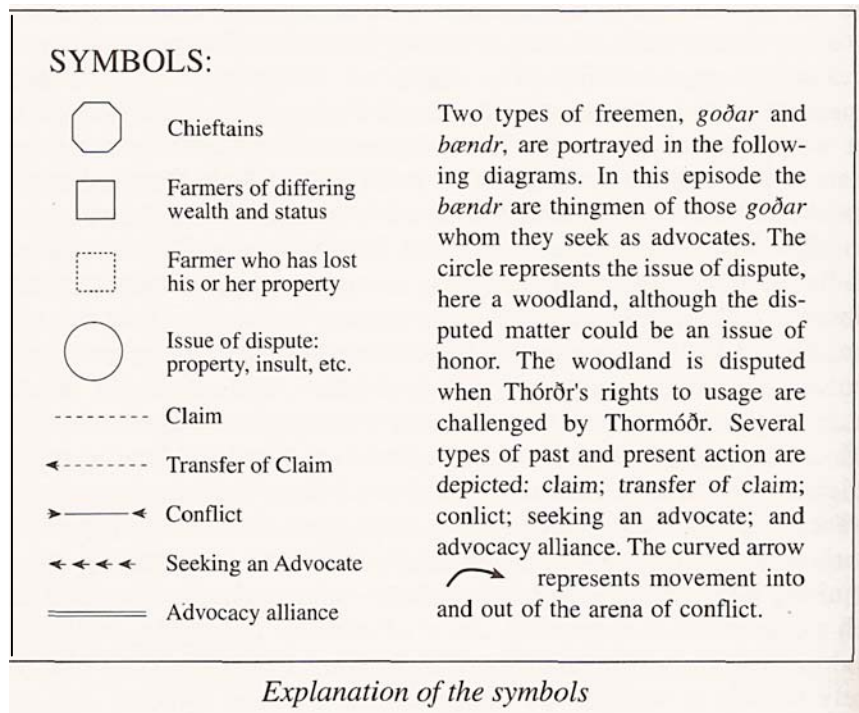
nevertheless does so in a manner that partly assuages his honor. Indeed, Thórðr gets the last bitter laugh in his dealings with his neighbor Thormóðr. In choosing to transfer his land to Brodd-Helgi, Thórðr, for a brief instant, takes control of the direction of the action. He exits from the quarrel with the knowledge—shared by the community—that his opponent Thormóðr is now embroiled in contention with a powerful antagonist. Thormóðr, in return for his determination to bully a neighbor, will now have to defend his person and property against Brodd-Helgi, a dangerous and motivated *goði*.

Honor, in fact, has been in the background the whole time. Despite the danger, honor made it difficult for Thórðr to do nothing. Faced with a humiliating situation, the farmer would have been mocked and probably goaded by others into challenging and perhaps even attempting to kill Thormóðr—a risky venture. Instead, Thórðr turns to an advocate, proving himself a difficult man to humiliate. Once Thórðr has transferred his land, he cannot be intimidated into dropping his claim. To the contrary, he is relieved of responsibility. The rights of prosecution that come with ownership have been assumed by Brodd-Helgi. With the *schaden Freude* that we so often see in the Icelandic texts, Thórðr can enjoy, from a distance, the dangers (and death) that await Thormóðr in the escalating feud between the *goðar*, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir.

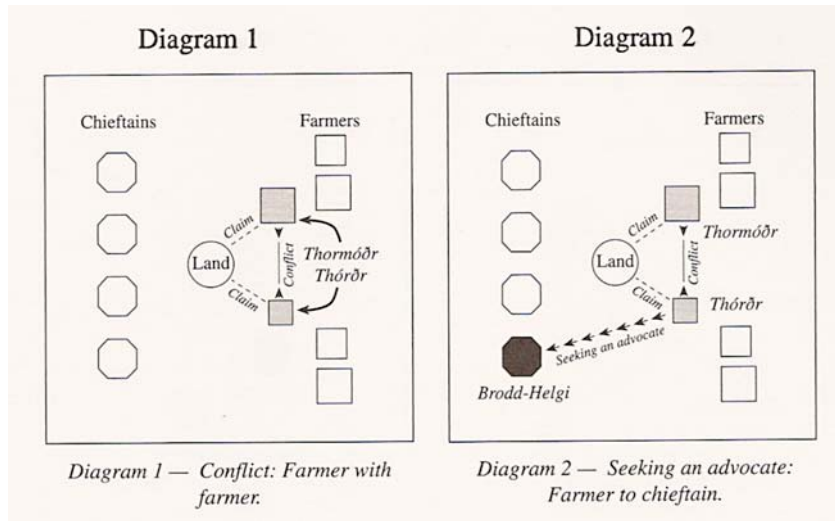
Inherent in the exchange between Brodd-Helgi and Thórðr is the fact that Brodd-Helgi also has choices. As an aggressive chieftain he is always interested in increasing his wealth and power. Before taking on the *bóndi*'s case, Brodd-Helgi must consider the risk and weigh the costs of his involvement. Again nothing is said in the text, but the simple, repetitive nature of the action focuses the reader's mind on the available choices. Reflection on these choices was a critical undertaking for the medieval audience, who knew in advance that Brodd-Helgi fails in the end. In this instance, because Brodd-Helgi is already engaged in an escalating feud with his rival chieftain Geitir, he apparently does not mind taking the risk. Acquiring a claim to a valuable woodland—along with the possibilities that such a case offers for harassing Geitir's thingman Thormóðr—will enhance Brodd-Helgi's position. At least that is what Brodd-Helgi thinks. He is surely willing to weather the disapproval and public dishonor that comes with his greedily snatching up Thórðr's land rather than coming with moderation (*hóf*) to the assistance of a distressed thingman. The audience,

however, is aware that Brodd-Helgi's death will be caused by just such immoderate rapacity for wealth and power.

The following diagrams are vehicles for analyzing dynamics on all levels of the feud spectrum. We map the path of the medieval storyteller as he fashions his tale within the social and economic realities of his society. The diagrams reveal a chain of actions largely devoid of the particulars of a single saga. They delineate the thematic blocks of saga story, while tracing the path of a disputed parcel of land in an escalating feud between chieftains. By deconstructing the story in this way, we see social patterns within the context of the rural society; we recognize the constraints placed upon the sagateller by the knowledge and expectations of his audience. This is the process of "creating" story within an already established tradition of social memory.¹⁵

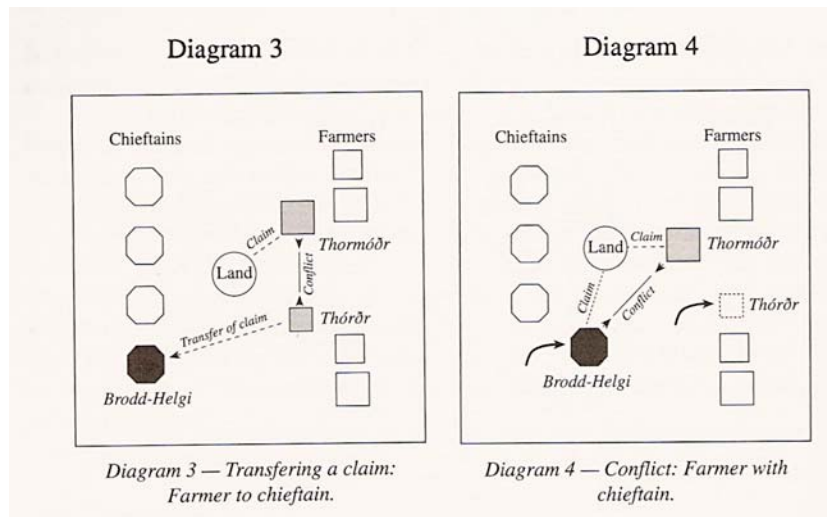


¹⁵ For an important study of this subject and one that includes the sagas, see Fentress and Wickham 1992.



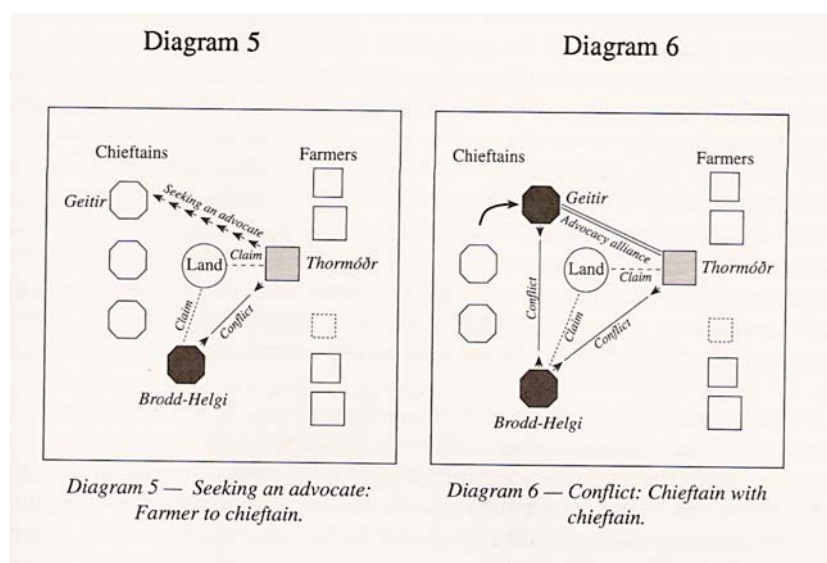
The first diagram portrays the initial phase of the dispute between Thórðr and Thormóðr. At this stage, the conflict is limited to the farmers, with chieftains having no reason to intervene. There is, however, movement within the system. As a result of Thórðr and Thormóðr's quarrel, the land has lost its place as a securely owned possession; it has moved into the liminal area of contest. Not yet a prize for the *goðar*, the woods are no longer safely owned by farmers. Here the social reality is well-known to the medieval audience but again left unsaid. Chieftains do not replenish their wealth by regular and open means such as taxation; rather, they amass property in a predatory manner, taking advantage of the troubles of farmers like Thórðr.

At the stage of this first diagram the confrontation could have been settled between the two farmers. If a settlement had been arranged, the property would not have remained in play. Thormóðr, however, is unreasonable, and Thórðr is forced to seek the aid of an advocate (diagram 2). As a result, the property moves within the reach of a chieftain. In this instance the dispute is over a piece of land. In different *thættir*, the quarrel may be over chattels such as items of a dowry, or more intangible matters such as insult or other offenses to honor.



Thórðr finds a powerful advocate, but as noted earlier, Brodd-Helgi demands the payment of Thórðr's property, including the farmer's clouded interest in the woodland. Caught between his threatening neighbor and his grasping *goði*, Thórðr has little choice. Negotiations are quickly completed. The farmer's claim to half-ownership of the land is transferred (diagram 3), and Thórðr and his family move to Brodd-Helgi's farm. In demanding Thórðr's farm, Brodd-Helgi allows his greed for property to submerge his role as protector of his thingmen and arbitrator of local disputes. Decisions such as this one have much to do with the ultimate success or failure of individual chieftains. The outcome of all these choices makes it clear that Thórðr's loss of his land to his chieftain signals a change in the dramatic tension of the story. The honor and the prestige of a chieftain are now engaged in a public dispute.

With Brodd-Helgi replacing Thórðr, the dispute advances from the private to the public realm. The stage is now set for a conflict between Thormóðr and the chieftain, Brodd-Helgi (diagram 4). While ownership of the land remains in dispute, other larger issues are at stake. A chieftain's honor and reputation are not just his own but represent the power and standing of his thingmen. In this instance, the dispute becomes a major test of political strength. Because Thormóðr is unwilling to stand alone against Brodd-Helgi, he now also seeks the assistance of a powerful advocate. Thormóðr goes to his chieftain, Geitir, Brodd-Helgi's rival (diagram 5).



Geitir accepts the case from Thormóðr, his thingman. The chieftain does not demand the farmer's ownership interest in the parcel of land as payment; therefore Thormóðr, unlike Thórðr, remains in the picture. The medieval audience is aware that Geitir, in accepting the case, has considered a number of factors. Among them are the effect his action will have on his position in the community, his reputation with his thingmen, and his ability to gather support if the case goes to the thing or if it turns into a fight. Brodd-Helgi, who is presented as a capricious and impetuous individual, has, unlike Geitir, ignored the nuances of these issues. Through such detail, the sagateller draws a fine distinction between the two rivals.

Taking stock at this point of the progression of the narrative, we see that the sagateller, guided by the convergent path of the social and narrative patterns, has logically and with seemingly little contrivance escalated his story into a conflict between *goðar*. The intrinsic interest of the story has increased as the tale changes from a dispute between petty farmers to a clash between major rivals in the Vápnafjord area. The conflict is poised to spread to Iceland at large as it escalates to the level of the Althing, involving other chieftains and farmers as supporters, judges, and arbitrators.

As soon as a chieftain has taken on a case involving a confrontation, he leaves the security of his established position. In this instance, two professional advocates, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir, have exercised their options to intervene in a dispute originating between farmers. As a result, they enter into the arena of contest, risking the loss of everything from reputation to life (diagram 6). Land, status, honor—all the tangibles and intangibles of medieval Icelandic society—are at stake. The woodland also remains in play. The property, although claimed by several parties, is possessed by no one. As the contest advances to an open feud, the uninvolved *bændr*, as well as other *goðar*, watch from the sidelines. These interested parties follow the action carefully, knowing that the outcome might provide them with a range of possibilities, from unanticipated opportunity to a threatening shift in the balance of power.

We can discern a basic rule of sagatelling. If the sagateller was guided and restrained by the underlying structure of the social patterning, he was, nevertheless, free to selectively adapt a pool of common material and characters to his own exigencies. In the instance of *Vápnfirðinga saga*, the sagateller works with the famous contest between Geitir and Brodd-Helgi. Remaining within “historical” tradition, the storyteller adjusts cadence and focuses audience attention by, for instance, repeatedly drawing character distinctions between the two leaders. The sagateller did not, however, attempt to alter the underlying social patterning. There is no creative expansion of the steps (or possibilities) of Icelandic feud by, for instance, having one of the characters appeal to God for divine intervention, a common feature in other medieval narratives.¹⁶ Rather, the narrator stays within the actions of realistic Icelandic dispute, repeatedly concentrating on socially based choices. In so doing the teller offers the audience the opportunity not only to evaluate individual behavior but also to savor emotion. Presented, as we see from the diagrams, in incremental steps of action, memory of past events comes alive, serving the medieval community as both entertainment and as a crucial tool of socialization. The

¹⁶ For example, the Old French hero Roland does this when caught at Roncesvalles, a story that the thirteenth-century Icelanders surely knew.

narrative may well contain fact, but it is not dominated by the requirement that it be factual, a consequential distinction.¹⁷

The small pattern that we have abstracted here is the most basic and most frequently repeated progression of conflict in saga narrative. The intervention of advocates in a dispute sets in motion events that determine the success or failure of the society's big men. If the dispute advances, the chieftains engaged will be forced to call in or purchase favors from other chieftains and influential farmers. The disputed land is no longer the most important issue, but it remains the trophy in the contest. If the conflict ends here, the chieftains return to the security of their defined positions, accepting such readjustments of power and reputation as have occurred. The ownership of the land will be settled, with the property returning to the unambiguous status of a defined possession.

If a settlement is not achieved, a new series of patterned actions commences based on the flow chart of possible decisions, and this is what happens in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. The narrative continues with new acts of conflict and of advocacy-seeking, but, as with the chain of events that we have abstracted, the number of moves on the chessboard of Icelandic feud is limited.¹⁸ Over and over in the sagas, we see the same pattern of dispute escalation. The diagrams presented here can, with little variation, be used in saga after saga to abstract a fundamental progression, providing a much-needed analytical tool for exploring a core social drama. Focusing on the cultural roots of repetitive action shifts the discourse of saga studies. It lays the foundations for a methodology that analyzes the convergence of social and literary norms and allows us to confront directly the issue of social memory. Surely, as the diagrams show, we will see that a sagateller's art was based less on invention than on skill in describing traditional actions.

The sagas are a literature famed for economy of style. Through tersely described action, the texts harmonize the private and public aspects of Icelandic life, capturing the intellectual and emotional attention of the

¹⁷ Just why the fact-fiction issue has been of such importance in saga studies has long interested me. For a discussion of the cultural background to this issue, see Byock 1990-91. Although the sagas are surely not a body of factually accurate texts, some parts of some sagas nevertheless display remarkable evidence of oral memory; see for example Byock 1993.

¹⁸ These are not moves in the Proppian sense, but rather are more fluid and adaptable.

medieval audience. This convergence served the medieval storyteller well, providing an underlying structure for the narrative. The repeated presentation of incident after incident of dispute and settlement, all so similar in essential elements but so varied in specifics, was bound by strict social convention. Conflict, the heart of dramatic narration, had to be controlled and presented in light of social norms. In following the patterns of traditional action, the sagateller could embellish character and add detail, giving the story a particular stamp without violating social realism. The attentive and knowledgeable medieval audience, aware of the inherent possibilities of the drama, was partner to the author in the creation of the text. The sagateller chained together the choices in the story; the audience interpreted the choices in a social context.

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A Poet on the Achaean Wall

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In his last-century B.C. survey of the Troad, Strabo is concerned with the nearness of what was called, in his time, the ναύσταθμον—“the naval base”—to the traditional site of Troy. By ναύσταθμον, Strabo means that stretch of coastline on which the Achaeans hauled up their ships and in front of which the *Iliad* tells us that the Achaeans built a wall in the ninth year of the war. Because of the dangerous proximity of “the naval base” to what was thought to be the site of the city (about 20 stadia or approximately two and one-half miles), Strabo believes that either the Greeks were foolish in not fortifying their camp sooner, or that the Trojans were cowardly in not overwhelming it before it was fortified (13.1.36).¹

Thucydides expresses a similar interest in the wall in Book I of the *History*, but it appears that either he is working from a version of the Troy tale that varies greatly from that presented in our *Iliad* in this respect or that his personal military experience has caused him to read less thoroughly than he might. He simply asserts that the wall must have been there from the beginning. For it to have been there, his reasoning continues, the Achaeans had clearly won an initial beachhead victory, since how else might they have been able to have fortified their camp in the face of strong Trojan opposition (1.11)?²

¹ There is another place in the area, called Ἀγαιῶν λιμένα—“the Harbor of the Achaeans”—and Strabo (13.1.36) believes that, had *it* been the Achaean camp, the behavior of both sides would have been even more puzzling, as it is only about twelve stadia (a little under 1.5 miles) from the site of Troy.

² This passage of Thucydides has been the subject of learned discussion for many years. For a sense of the possible problem and its solutions, see, for example, Page (1959:315-24), and two replies (Davison 1965:5-28 and West 1969:255-60). In all of these studies, the given is that there was a standardized text of the *Iliad* in Thucydides' time and that we are dealing here with possible variants of that text. I myself would argue that

As Nestor says in his original proposal in *Iliad* 7, the wall's purpose is to act as a protection both for the Achaeans and for their ships (7.338).³ The poem tells us that these ships are in such abundance that they are drawn up in several rows (14.30-35), but that, even arranged in ranks, they fill up the space between those two promontories that later classical people referred to as Cape Sigeium and Cape Rhoeteium (14.35-36).⁴

For invaders from far across the Aegean, the loss of such ships would mean complete disaster. As Ajax mockingly calls out to the Achaeans in 15.504-5:

ἦ ἔλπεσθ', ἦν νῆας ἔλη κορυθαίολος Ἑκτωρ,
ἐμβαδὸν ἴξεσθαι ἦν πατρίδα γαῖαν ἕκαστος;

Or do you each hope that, if Hector with the glittering helmet should take the ships, you can walk to your own homeland?⁵

So obviously vulnerable are the Achaeans, then, that we can well understand the impatience of Strabo or the assumptions of Thucydides about the wall. With the only way home so easily threatened, the ships *must* have been walled in earlier—or should have been.

Thus, while these two ancient writers appear to disagree upon the timing of the construction, they certainly concur, even though four hundred years apart in time, that, at some point in the Troy story, tradition told of how the Achaeans perceived that their ships were threatened and therefore protected them with a fortification. There is then the problem of just where

the available evidence, both literary and pictorial, suggests that multiple versions of many Troy stories were in circulation, at least from the sixth century B.C., and that no one version was privileged in Thucydides' time and even through the fourth and possibly later centuries. Thucydides himself, for instance, although he mentions "Homer" several times, attaching his name to various bits of information, never specifically refers to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* by title. The only Homeric work actually given a title is what Thucydides calls (3.104.4) Homer's "Prooimia of Apollo."

³ One might also add that it served to protect the Achaeans' loot; see *Il.* 12.7-8.

⁴ In Strabo's time, these two capes were strongly identified with figures from the Trojan War era; see Strabo 13.1.31-32.

⁵ This and all other translations throughout the text are mine. All *Iliad* citations are from Monro and Allen's Oxford Classical Text.

that wall might have been located. Strabo, drawing on Homer, later classical sources, and local information and tradition, feels reasonably confident in his knowledge of just where Troy and its walls had been.⁶ Except for mentioning the local name “naval base,” however, he never provides any evidence for the placement of the Achaean wall, leading us to the conclusion that the traditional site of the wall of the Achaeans was uncertain even in Strabo’s time. Any more detailed evidence for its existence than a name must come from the poem itself, which supplies us, as it seems to have supplied Strabo, with information about the wall, its placement, and composition. These details are scattered throughout our text from books 7 to 24, but, brought together, they present a fairly complete picture of the wall as our present *Iliad* describes it.⁷ From the landward side, one approached a deep ditch whose wide bottom was either palisaded or at least sown with stakes to prevent easy access by chariot (7.440-41).⁸ Although they are not clearly mentioned, one must presume that causeways at least a chariot wide were imagined as leading to the several gates (7.438-39), one of which is vividly described when Hector smashes it in the closing lines of Book 12 (453-62). The wall itself is understood to consist of stones revetted with timbers (12.28-29) and surmounted by a series of strong-points or towers (7.436-37), with a catwalk along the top (12.265-66). Even if such a wall never existed in fact, such detailed visualizing makes it easy to see why writers in the far past might take it for granted that such a wall had been erected at *some* time during the war with Troy.

Since the publication of Parry’s work on the oral nature of South Slavic and Homeric heroic poetry and Lord’s continuation and enlargement of it, the *Iliad* has been seen by many as, if not an actual oral poem itself, certainly oral-derived.⁹ The criteria for this view are the use of formulae,

⁶ Strabo believed that there were no remains of Homer’s Troy, but had much to say about its stones and about the Trojan plain (13.1.34-44).

⁷ For all examples given in the notes, it should be understood that there are many similar examples within the text not cited here.

⁸ The success of this trench and its palisade is attested at 12.49-59.

⁹ See Foley 1990. Foley, who created this useful term, defines “oral-derived texts” as “the manuscript or tablet works of finally uncertain provenance that nonetheless show oral traditional characteristics” (5).

the employment of type-scenes to build the larger blocks of the story, and extensive metrical and syntactic patterning.¹⁰

The mark of the Homeric poet, then, like the South Slavic, is in the employment of these features to shape his traditional materials into a narrative pattern of great technical complexity. For the so-called “hard Parryists,” this also means that most, if not all, of what goes on in the narrative is governed in turn by what governs the techniques. Because such a belief in the paramount nature of the technical would seem to negate the artistic and human qualities that so abound in Homer, there has long been a negative reaction to this extreme position. The danger in this reaction, however, is that it can cause a swing to the other extreme, in which Homer becomes a sort of proto-Milton, with complete control over every aspect of the text, and the work of Parry, Lord, and others, which has been so helpful to our understanding of the *Iliad* as a work within a greater tradition, is misused or discarded completely. In Lord’s seminal volume, *The Singer of Tales* (1960), he expresses great admiration for the *guslar* Avdo Medjedović, who, while retaining all of the technical features of his oral tradition, can add to his story a certain tell-tale shape of his own, as for instance, Lord sees Avdo doing in his reworking of Mumin Vlahovljak’s rendition of the song *Bećiragić Meho*. As Lord describes Avdo at work:

The song was a long one of several thousand lines. Avdo began and as he sang, the song lengthened, the ornamentation and richness accumulated, and the human touches of character, touches that distinguished Avdo from other singers, imparted a depth of feeling that had been missing in Mumin’s version.¹¹

If a singer in the South Slavic tradition, from which we have learned so much applicable to Homer, can so rework and embellish a song he has received from another singer within his tradition, I would wonder if and how we might perceive the same possibility for some trace of individuality within the limits of tradition in our text of the *Iliad*.

¹⁰ For a bibliographical survey of material on formulae and type-scenes, see Edwards 1986, 1988, and 1992.

¹¹ 1960:78. Lord very helpfully includes a comparative analysis of the first major theme of the poem as stated by Mumin and embellished by Avdo; see his Appendix I: 223-34.

If we begin, as I believe we must, by understanding the *Iliad* as we have it to be only one of numerous tellings of the same story, we must first ask ourselves what in our *Iliad* might be a constant throughout various other versions of the poem as sung by other singers. Unfortunately, unlike Lord, Homerists do not have the luxury of a wealth of comparative diachronic and synchronic material from the same tradition.¹² When he admires Avdo's reworking of Mumin's performance, Lord is not only setting Avdo's performance against Mumin's, and then against all of Avdo's other performances, but against many other performances that he himself has heard in the same tradition as well. Lacking the kind of evidence that would allow us to set our *Iliad* into the larger Troy tale tradition that once existed, we can never know for certain how our present *Iliad* would match against the rest of the tradition or even against other tellings of the same story, so that we might be able to see our poem's teller/creator in the same sort of exterior perspective in which Lord could see Avdo.

Our constant must be so broad as to suggest that, without it, the *Iliad* simply could not exist as the poem that we know. To insure this, that constant must interpenetrate the text at as many levels as possible, from the human to the divine, from Troy to the Achaean camp. To judge by its pervasiveness in the poem as we now have it, and by the number of *Iliad* manuscripts that begin with a statement of it, we might then tentatively put forth Achilles' $\mu\eta\gamma\nu\iota\varsigma$ (wrath) and its effects as a strong possibility for that constant.¹³

If Achilles' anger *is* a constant, it might be so because of the many advantages that it would provide for a poet. With Achilles as the active central figure of the poem, his great power would confine the frightened Trojans within the walls, as he boasts in 9.352-55:

¹² In contrast to the paucity of Homeric materials, see the 25-page "A Digest of Serbocroatian Epic songs in the Milman Parry Collection of Southslavic Texts" (Lord 1954:21-45). For another view, see Griffin 1977:39-53. As we have nothing but the rags of verse, scattered references, late prose authors like "Dares" and "Dictys," and Photius' ninth-century A.D. version of Proclus' fifth-century A.D. prose epitome to testify to the existence of the so-called "epic cycle" (in itself a problematic concept that requires further investigation), I believe it unwise at present to attempt such detailed comparisons.

¹³ Even another possible proem, such as that cited by G.S. Kirk, and given in the apparatus to 1.1 in the Oxford Classical Text, still mentions the $\mu\eta\gamma\nu\iota\varsigma$, even perhaps strengthening it by adding $\chi\acute{o}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ to it. See Kirk 1985:52.

ὄφρα δ' ἐγὼ μετ' Ἀχαιοῖσιν πολέμιζον
 οὐκ ἐθέλεσκε μάχην ἀπὸ τείχεος ὀρνύμεν Ἐκτωρ,
 ἀλλ' ὅσον ἐς Σκαϊάς τε πύλας καὶ φηγὸν ἵκανεν.
 ἔνθα ποτ' οἶον ἔμιμνε, μόγις δέ μευ ἔκφυγεν ὄρμῆν.

So long as I fought alongside the Achaeans,
 Hector was not inclined to bring on a fight outside the wall,
 but he only came up to the Skaian Gates and the Oak Tree.
 There once he stood up to me alone, but he barely escaped my attack.

Such behavior on both sides would make for a very short poem, one imagines.¹⁴ With Achilles removed from the action, but expected back at an unspecified time, however, a poet has greater scope. If he uses the actions around the withdrawal of Achilles as the opening of his poem, he can then work in as many heroes and their deeds as he wants for as long as he wants, the only time limit and length limit being the self-imposed one of bringing about Achilles' eventual return, which will automatically indicate the beginning of the poem's closure. The hope (or dread) of that return will also provide a natural power source for the story as a whole. So long as the Achaeans, the Trojans, and the listeners feel Achilles' looming presence, no incident will be the final one, but, instead, one happening will demand another in logical succession as the narrative moves under the poet's verse-making. As well, the return itself is full of possibilities: Will Agamemnon placate Achilles? Will the appeal of his friends touch his heart? Will the words of Patroclus? Will the mandate of the gods? Or will it be something completely unexpected, which does not involve his wounded honor at all?

If we take Achilles' wrath as our traditional constant in the *Iliad*, we must then ask ourselves in what elements of the poem we might see any marks of individuality within that constant. How might our poet be seen to add to or rework the material of the tradition to show off his own distinct skill? Avdo displays his great craft, as Lord says, by developing material already within the song as Mumin gives it, his demonstration of his ability

¹⁴ Might this be the reason why Apollonius removes Heracles so quickly from the Argo? Tradition may have obliged him to bring Heracles on board, but so much power invested in one hero could have rendered unnecessary the other heroes on the expedition, as well as sapped the role of Jason and perhaps even obviated the need for Medea (at least in her role as sorceress) entirely.

causing the song to grow from 2294 to 6313 lines (Lord 1960:103). Comparison of passages in the two versions shows that Avdo expands and develops descriptions of places, people, and things, increases the amount of dialogue, and provides biographical and autobiographical information for characters, among other embellishments.¹⁵ Where could our poet make his mark?

Strabo, in his survey of Trojan geography, remarks that Homer “says that the [Achaean] wall was newly-built or did not exist, but the poet himself made it, then tore it down, as Aristotle says.”¹⁶ The first half of this statement fits in with the *Iliad* as we presently have it, the wall only being erected there in 7. The second half, however, is rather curious. Because we no longer possess Aristotle’s context outside Strabo’s quotation, we cannot tell if this is a criticism or simply a factual remark. As well, we cannot tell whether Aristotle is basing this remark upon literary evidence no longer available to us, as has been argued for Thucydides’ comments on the wall,¹⁷ or is deducing it from the lack of physical evidence of the wall itself. We also have little or no testimony for this part of the whole Troy tale except the *Iliad* text we currently possess, so it is possible that what we read in our *Iliad* is simply received tradition, even if that tradition was unknown to Aristotle: at this point in the tale, the wall was said to have been built, and so the poet builds it, as the first part of Strabo’s quotation suggests. There is, however, the possibility that Aristotle is actually saying that, in his time, the Troy tale tradition as a whole had no wall, and that its existence was limited to one version of this part of the story, the creation of an especially imaginative poet.

Surviving later classical literary evidence certainly does not depict the wall as a major feature of the Troy tale. The *Aeneid* mentions the Achaean camp under the military term *castra*¹⁸ in 1.472, 2.27, and 2.462, but no

¹⁵ See Lord 1960:223-34 for a valuable and illuminating comparison of the two texts.

¹⁶ νεωστὶ γὰρ γεγονέναι φησὶ τὸ τεῖχος ἢ οὐδ’ ἐγένετο, ὁ δὲ πλάσας ποιητῆς ἠφάνισεν, ὡς Ἀριστοτέλης φησὶν (Strabo 13.1.36).

¹⁷ For bibliography on the controversy over this point, see note 2 above.

¹⁸ This usage would seem to imply that Vergil thought of it as having both wall and ditch—*vallum* and *fossa*—like a Roman legionary encampment.

fighting is described as happening at its wall. Neptune prophesies a number of the events of Troy to Thetis in Statius' fragmentary *Achilleid* (1.84-94) with no word of the wall. Dictys Cretensis, the fourth-century A.D. translator of an early imperial Greek version of the Troy story, mentions the wall several times, but only very briefly, as if tradition in his time obliged him to acknowledge its existence, but nothing more (2.43, 3.1, and 3.13).¹⁹ Proclus' very late summaries of the other poems in the Troy cycle take no notice of the Achaean wall at all.

Judging from this later evidence, then, it may be that Aristotle is saying that the wall is unique to one version of the story, that preserved in our *Iliad*, and not to the tradition as a whole, which seems to have known of other possibilities. It should be stressed, of course, that what may be hints for other versions of the combat at the ships are tightly interwoven with the story as our *Iliad* tells it, making it difficult to discuss them without constantly conceding that they may be contradicted by other details in the text, but I believe that we might deduce from these hints at least two choices for narratives other than our current one. For the sake of reconstruction, I will make them more distinct and independent than they really appear in our text.

In the first choice, there is neither wall nor ditch, a possibility recognized by Leaf in his text and commentary.²⁰ In this version of the story, the Achaeans, perhaps on foot, fight Trojans in chariots on the plain below Troy. At least this is the situation throughout 11, at the beginning of which (11.47-52) the Achaeans dismount, cross the ditch, and move into battle as infantry. Thereafter, in incident after incident, dismounted Achaeans kill mounted Trojans, from the death of the Trojan Bienor and his charioteer, Oileus (11.91-100), to Odysseus' killing of Chersidamas as he jumps from his chariot (11.423-25). When all of the main Achaean leaders have been wounded and have withdrawn one by one,²¹ except for Ajax, the

¹⁹ In each case the word used is *vallum*, thus linking it to the concept of *castra*.

²⁰ Leaf 1900-2/1971:13.384. Although Leaf indicates something of the narrative overlappings in our version of the *teichomachia*, he attributes this to the work of editors, rather than to the confluence of tale versions sometimes found in oral traditional material (1-2).

²¹ Their withdrawal is by chariot, used in this case as a sort of field ambulance—see 11.273-74 (Agamemnon), 11.399-400 (Diomedes—an echo of 11.273-74), 11.487-88 (Odysseus), and 11.511-13 (where Idomeneus directs Nestor to carry away

Achaeans retreat,²² closely pursued by the Trojans. With no wall or ditch between them and the ships, the Trojans, still in their chariots,²³ then sweep into the Achaean camp to begin the burning. It is perhaps at this time in this version of the tale that the prophecy uttered by Zeus at 8.473-77 (and not fulfilled in our *Iliad*) takes place:

οὐ γὰρ πρὶν πολέμου ἀποπαύσεται ὄβριμος Ἑκτωρ.
 πρὶν ὄρθαι παρὰ ναῦφι ποδώκεα Πηλείωνα,
 ἧματι τῷ ὅτ' ἂν οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ πρύμνησι μάχωνται
 στείνει ἐν αἰνοτάτῳ περὶ Πατρόκλοιο θανόντος
 ὡς γὰρ θέσφατόν ἐστι·

For powerful Hector will not cease from fighting
 before swift-footed Achilles rouses himself by the ships,
 on the day in which they fight each other by the prows
 in the very tight place around dead Patroclus,
 for so it has been ordained.

Our evidence for a version in which the wall and ditch are absent is circumstantial here, relying upon what is *not* mentioned, but that absence has a certain consistency. For instance, when Agamemnon and Diomedes suggest their various plans to the beaten Achaeans at the beginning of 9, neither takes into consideration the defensive potential of the wall and ditch, nor does Nestor, the man who originally proposed its construction. When Agamemnon looks mournfully from the ships to the Trojans on the plain

the wounded Machaon). It is puzzling why the Achaeans would surrender the use of chariots as fighting platforms only to use them as conveyances for the wounded, especially when they are battling on an open plain and fighting an enemy who regularly employs them. Perhaps, once upon a time, the Achaeans had come to Troy without wheeled transport and later generations of poets had included chariots on the analogy of the methods of warfare of the Trojans and their allies.

²² Perhaps at the suggestion of Thoas? See 15.295-99.

²³ In our text of the *Iliad*, Hector has followed Poulydamas' counsel that the Trojans dismount at the ditch (12.81). If other possibilities for the battle around the Achaean camp still exist within our text, including one or more in which the Trojans made a chariot charge over open ground right into the ships, this might then explain the seeming inconsistency of Hector's dismounting at 13.749 from a chariot from which he had already dismounted in 12.81.

(10.11-14), the poet appears to ignore the fortifications raised with such great labor between them, as does Zeus, when he sits upon Ida and looks out over Troy and the ships (11.82). And even Achilles, in his reply to Ajax, leaves the wall and ditch out of his conditions when he declares that he will not rejoin the fighting (9.651-53):

πρίν γ' υἷὸν Πριάμοιο δαίφρονος Ἑκτορα δῖον,
Μυρμιδόνων ἐπὶ τε κλισίας νῆας ἰκέσθαι
κτείνοντ' Ἀργείους, κατὰ τε σμῦξαι πυρὶ νῆας.

until godlike Hector, the son of skillful Priam,
comes to the lean-tos and ships of the Myrmidons,
killing Achaeans and burning down the ships with fire.

In our second choice, there would be a ditch filled with palisading, but no wall behind it. If the Achaeans are conceived as being on foot and are forced to face Trojan chariots, this would seem a very logical defense behind which to retreat. For the sake of greater maneuverability, the poet appears to imagine that there were some crossing points, however, as the Achaean leaders make their way through it (10.198-99), Odysseus drives the horses of Rhesos across it (10.564-65), and the Trojan Asios must cross it somehow to assault a gate (12.110-15).²⁴ As in the first version, the Achaeans, perhaps on foot, move out to attack the Trojans. Although they are described as crossing the ditch, however, the Achaeans are never described as crossing the wall, and this is true not only for their setting out, but for their return. After Eris stirs them up (11.3-14) and Agamemnon arms himself (11.15-46), the Achaeans, who have been by their ships,²⁵ move to the ditch without ever going through any of the gates that are described as forming part of the wall's structure (7.438-39). When they come to the edge of the ditch, they dismount and cross and form up on the

²⁴ Could the *πτολέμοιο γεφύρας* ("causeway of battle") spoken of by Athena at 8.378 and by the poet in describing where the Trojans camp in 8.553 have been a causeway? Apollo is described as forming one (*γεφύρωσεν*) at 15.357-58. Certainly later Greek usage sees *γέφυρα* as indicating a bridge. See *LSJ* (9th ed.), s.v. *γέφυρα*.

²⁵ Eris stands on Odysseus' ship in the middle of the beached fleet so that she can be heard in both directions, 11.5-6.

other side, their chariots following them.²⁶ They are beaten back and some perhaps get caught in the ditch, as we see in 15.343-45,²⁷ but are never shown as recrossing the wall before they appear as its defenders in 12 to 14. For the Trojans, the ditch proves no obstacle, since Apollo, as he has promised Hector (15.258-61), knocks it down (15.355-59). The Trojans then sweep in as in the previous version, mounted on their chariots, and perhaps Zeus' prophecy of the combat of Hector and Achilles is fulfilled here or Patroclus or someone drives the Trojans back, because two Trojan retreats are depicted in 15 and 16. In both, the ditch is specifically mentioned as being crossed (15.1-3 and 16.367-71),²⁸ but the wall is not.

If we set up Achilles' wrath as our traditional constant, and choose to interpret Aristotle as saying that the Achaean wall is unique to one version of the story, that found in our *Iliad*, and not to the Troy tale tradition as a whole, I believe that we can then scale down the problem of individual versus tradition to the level of our single available text. This is not to say that we will then expect to discover here comprehensive proof that we are looking at the proto-Milton mentioned above. Rather, we are simply exploring, at Aristotle's prompting, the possibility that our *Iliad* provides evidence of a middle position between a poet who is almost a mechanical slave to tradition and one so completely free of tradition that his work is only a backward-looking imitation at best. This middle position would posit a poet who, while working with traditional material about Troy and the Trojan war and employing verse and narrative techniques from his poetic tradition, could, like Avdo, add something for his own poetic purposes, thus displaying a definite degree of individuality within that tradition. To trace how that individuality might be introduced and employed, we must return to the beginning of the tale.

At our *Iliad*'s opening, it is clear that the Achaeans have not been

²⁶ See 11.47-52 for the dismounting and forward movement. We never see the Achaeans form up again, but they are described as fighting the Trojans on the far side in 11.70-73.

²⁷ Here I read τεῖχος as meaning "palisade," as the verbs used around it include ἐνπλήξαντες, "to be tangled in" and δύνοντο, which in both active and middle voices bears among its meanings the idea of "to penetrate."

²⁸ In 16.367-71, some Trojans are trapped there, as the Achaeans had been before them.

successful in their attempt to take Troy, although they have sat below it for nine years. Thucydides states confidently that their delay derived from a lack of available funds, and the resultant need to divide their forces for crop-cultivation and raiding for supplies, which never allowed them to concentrate their superior forces for one bold assault, or at least a proper siege (1.11). Such pragmatism shows us a practical military mind at work, one that sees expeditions and sieges as the almost mathematical outcome of military logistics. With the proper forces for the job and the cash to supply them, soldiers should be able to get on with their work. The *Iliad*, however, is not the historical account of a campaign, as Thucydides appears to assume. While Thucydides perceives the world as constrained by military logistics, the traditional poet lives in a world of poetic logistics.

Thucydides' mention of raids introduces a basic contrast between his ideas of warfare and the warfare actually visible in the *Iliad*. For Thucydides, if the Achaeans had been properly supplied at the outset, they would have performed the classical siege: invested the city and thus blockaded food and reinforcements from entering or sorties from coming out, surrounded it with entrenchments, looked for or created a weak spot, called on the city to surrender, and, if it refused, stormed it and taken no prisoners—or sold the survivors as slaves.²⁹ Although there is a hint, in Nestor's account of what appears to be the siege of Thryoessa in 11, that these tactics were known to the tradition,³⁰ the Achaeans have, instead, landed and raided up and down the coast ever since their arrival.³¹ Such behavior might lead us to conclude that the Trojan War, if such had ever been, or perhaps just as it was imagined in poetic tradition, was actually never conceived as a Thucydidean campaign at all, but rather as a large retaliatory raid, in which Troy was to be quickly sacked, Helen seized, all portable valuables lifted, and then a quick sail made for home.³² Thus do

²⁹ See Thucydides 2.74-78, 3.20-24, 3.52-68, e.g., for his account of the siege of Plataea.

³⁰ See espec. 11.711-13—and the verb ἀμφεστρατόωντο in 713.

³¹ We hear mention of raids on Thebe, 1.366-67; Lyrnessos, 2.691; Tenedos, 11.624-25; Lesbos 9.664; Skyros, 9.667-68; Pedasos, 20.92. Achilles claims to have sacked twelve cities by sea and eleven by land since arriving, 9.328-29.

³² For Herodotus' version of this, see 1.1-5.

we observe cities like Lyrnessos sacked by the Achaeans during that nine-year period.³³

But Troy has not proved so easy, for military *and* poetic reasons, it appears. First, as would appeal to the practical Thucydides, the city is very solidly built—after all, its wall was originally constructed by Poseidon, perhaps with Apollo’s assistance.³⁴ Second, as Zeus and Apollo at various times indicate, Troy is fated to live out its life within an allotted time that transcends human (and perhaps even divine) actions.³⁵ Achilles may threaten the city, but the gods appear bound to maintain that time limit.³⁶

Thus, the Achaeans, faced with human and divine resistance, are caught between two stark possibilities, as enumerated by their chief enemy, Hector: they will either take fortified Troy or be overcome alongside their ships by the Trojans (7.71-72). There is, of course, the third possibility: immediate withdrawal. This is a possibility weighed on several occasions—as a disastrous test, by Agamemnon, in 2.139-41, and later, when things look their bleakest, as his serious suggestion in 14.74-81. What may ultimately stop the Achaeans are the consequences as laid out in Agamemnon’s bitter and lamenting words to the wounded Menelaus in 4.173-75:

καὶ δὲ κεν εὐχολὴν Πριάμῳ καὶ Τρωσὶ λίποιμεν
 Ἄργείην Ἑλένην· σέο δ’ ὅστέα πύσει ἄρουρα
 κειμένου ἐν Τροίῃ ἀτελευτήτῳ ἐπὶ ἔργῳ.

and so we would leave Achaean Helen to Priam and the Trojans
 to boast over, and the plowland will rot your bones at Troy,

³³ See Briseis’ description, 19.291-97.

³⁴ There are several different versions of the story of this construction, two in the *Iliad* alone. In 7.451-53, Poseidon says that he and Apollo built the wall. In 21.446-47, he claims to have built the wall himself, while Apollo herded Laomedon’s cattle. Apollodorus (2.5.9) states that the wall was built by both the gods. See Poulydamas’ description of the wall’s protection and his confidence in it in 18.274-83.

³⁵ Zeus lays out in some detail the latter part of the struggle for Troy in 15.58-71.

³⁶ See Apollo’s warning to Patroclus (16.707-9), and Zeus’ speech to the other gods (20.26-30).

on an unfinished task.³⁷

To leave Troy without completing what they had set out to do is to lose face at a terrible cost, something almost impossible to imagine in a warrior culture like that of the Troy tale.

But if we employ this reconstruction to attempt to explain the logic behind Achaean behavior as we are shown it, why, as Strabo wondered, have the Trojans been so slow to overwhelm them? Although the native Trojans are heavily outnumbered, as Agamemnon claims, we are told that their many allies augment them powerfully (2.123-33).³⁸ Why not come out of the city, slaughter the Achaeans, and destroy their way home? The answer appears to lie in the passage cited earlier, in which Achilles boasts to the embassy sent to bring him back into the fold. Odysseus has admitted that Achilles is desperately needed and that the ships will be lost without him (9.230-31), and Achilles replies that, when *he* was fighting for the Achaeans, Hector had not dared to go far from the shelter of Troy's wall (9.352-54), a statement that echoes Hera's reproach to the Achaeans in 5.³⁹ Achilles is clearly almost an army in himself, as he is quick to point out. And so, as far as our *Iliad* is concerned, there might be two reasons that have kept the Achaean camp unfortified. On the one hand, there seems to have been the possibility that the whole venture was never meant to be a formal siege, but was conceived only as a raid. The raid, however, went on longer than expected, but could not be abandoned without serious loss of face. On the other hand, it may never have occurred to the Achaeans to build a wall not because they were foolish, as Strabo thought them, but because Achilles himself has acted as their wall.

To test the workability of this idea, we have only to observe what happens when Achilles, in his anger at Agamemnon, removes his protection

³⁷ See also Agamemnon's speech to the Achaeans (2.119-22).

³⁸ Although this passage occurs in a speech in which Agamemnon is attempting to test his troops by telling them the worst, considering both that the war has lasted for nine years and that many Trojan allies are mentioned, not only in the *Iliad* but in the Troy tradition in general, I believe we might perceive some truth in this so far as the tradition goes.

³⁹ Hera here, disguised as Stentor, mocks the Achaeans by reminding them that, when Achilles was in the field, the Trojans as a whole remained by the Dardanian Gates (5.787-91).

from the Achaean camp. In earlier times, if the Achaeans were unable to break into Troy, neither did the Trojans assault the Achaean ships. But now the fortunes of the Achaeans and the Trojans seesaw, with neither side gaining the advantage. The Trojans begin to pursue a much more aggressive policy than formerly, heartened at first, we might suppose, because there is no sight of Achilles on the field of battle, and then because his absence is confirmed by Apollo as he cheers the Trojans on (4.509-13).

For the Achaeans to continue their occupation of the Trojan shoreline, Achilles must be either placated or replaced. If we are correct in believing that his absence allows the poet space in which to move his narrative in different ways, then the first choice, placation, must not be tried, or at least not be allowed to succeed too soon. The second choice, replacement, is also a difficult one. If another Achaean hero successfully takes Achilles' place, then there will be no reason to care if Achilles *does* return and the overall structure and potential long-range expectations of the narrative will be rendered completely useless. This is not to say that certain heroes—Diomedes in 5, Ajax in 14 and 15—cannot have great local success, but their victories are just that, local successes. Even Patroclus, as Achilles' stand-in, can only shine briefly, before being cut down, for the wrath to remain as the overarching theme of the narrative.

If animate heroes are not possible replacements, then perhaps something inanimate could be chosen. Since a wall has been successful all of these years in keeping the Achaeans out of Troy, and Achilles has been successful in keeping the Trojans out of the ships, what might seem more logical to a poet than to replace Achilles with a real wall, now that the Achaean equivalent has retired to his ships? After all, the simile of a fighting man as a kind of fortification is a common one in the *Iliad*. Ajax, in particular, is often seen as either bearing a shield like a tower (7.219, 17.128), or being a wall for the Achaeans (3.229, 6.5).

Such a barrier, once erected, can serve more than one purpose for the poet. Much of the combat before Troy consists of great clouds of warriors milling and slashing and stabbing at each other. Out of these clouds step individual fighters who challenge, fight duels, fire arrows, ride in their chariots, and then, if not killed or wounded, blend back into the clouds once more. When greater struggles develop, in which several warriors are named as they battle, they are often over the body or spoils of a fighter just fallen. The focus, however, is always on individual achievement in the plain. If this emphasis on duels and small struggles suggests that Homeric military

custom does not allow anything more grand, it would be difficult for the poet, should he want to vary his battle scenes, to change the focus from such duels to something larger. This could be especially true if he feels bound not to violate what may have been a traditional boundary in the story of the wrath, that the Achaeans must not make mass assaults upon or break into Troy.⁴⁰ The only attack we actually see in the *Iliad* upon the Trojan wall is, characteristically, that of a single warrior, Patroclus, in 16.702-4.⁴¹ If the poet is bound by convention not to portray concerted attacks on Troy, but is ambitious to show such attacks, a wall erected in front of the Achaean camp could free him from that convention and, at the same time, allow the assault he describes to stand in the minds of his listeners for what *might* happen to Troy.

Years of careful and intelligent Homeric study have shown that our *Iliad* is full of material that is used again and again to form lines and scenes and thus the *Iliad* as a whole, a method of composition that can often give the poem the effect of a series of echoes. Throughout the *Iliad*, the Achaean wall might then be seen as an echo of the Trojan, and the echo is important if we are to believe that the Achaean wall is anything more than a clumsy interpolation. If the Achaean wall has no real strength (as the Trojan clearly has), then it is neither a worthy replacement in the least for Achilles nor will it hold our attention long in the story. But this is not the case. The poet takes time to show us that the Achaean wall is a fairly careful mirroring of its Trojan counterpart. The Achaeans begin by piling up a tower on a mound, mimicking the great tower from which Helen identifies the Achaean leaders. Troy's gates, mentioned so often, are matched by gates in the Achaean wall. As there is a weak spot in the Trojan wall (6.433-34), so there is one in the Achaean (13.682-84). With such parallels, it is easy to see how the lines

πᾶσαι δ' ὀίγνυντο πύλαι, ἐκ δ' ἔσσυτο λαός.
πεζοί θ' ἰππῆές τε.

⁴⁰ Achilles might be echoing this boundary proscription when he tells Patroclus that he must not overreach himself while wearing Achilles' armor (16.83-85).

⁴¹ One other assault appears to have come close to the wall, but this is described at second-hand by Andromache, 6.435-39.

and all the gates were thrown open, and the people rushed out,
the infantry and the horsemen

can be first applied to Troy and the Trojans in 2.809-10, but to Trojans and Achaeans alike in 8.58-59, just after the wall's construction.

This mirror must be well constructed or it will not be convincing, yet, at the same time, it must have flaws or the poet will not be able to justify a successful assault. Thus Troy's mirror is seemingly less well-built,⁴² and it is set up impiously, without a prior appeal for the gods' blessing, as Poseidon complains (7.448-50). This provides the poet with the perfect opportunity to move the fighting into a new channel, in which he can use descriptions of the difficulty of the palisaded ditch, the assembling of assault teams, and offensive and defensive operations against walls, towers, and gates.

He also can avail himself of a new area of tension in which to play out his story. If we cannot experience the excitement of an Achaean attack on Troy, the poet can catch us up in the building fury of the Trojan assault on the Achaean camp—the rush across the plain, the scramble at the ditch, the doubt and turmoil on both sides, the initial break-in and repulse, Apollo's rally of Hector and the Trojans for a second attempt, the second Trojan repulse and the terrible retreat through the ditch—all with the Achaean wall as a focus. Having so much new narrative territory in which to work can give the poet the chance to display his *copia* to the fullest, while never exceeding what may have been traditional bounds.

When we set the Achaean wall in the context of Achilles' anger, we can also perceive its potential employment as a narrative-delaying tactic. If Zeus, at Thetis' pleading, is going to glorify the Trojans to discomfit the Achaeans, the poet could simply have allowed the battle to have raged in the plain, as it does up to the building of the wall in the latter half of 7. If there is a wall and not simply a battle-line to halt the Trojans, then the struggle before the re-entry of Achilles can be just that much longer, and he can appear at an even more dramatic moment.⁴³ That the erection of the

⁴² It is rough-hewn enough that the Trojans can attempt to pry it apart with crowbars (12.257-60), and Sarpedon can even pull part of it down (12.268-69).

⁴³ This building of tension is echoed in the elaborate parable of the reluctant Meleager and the defense of Calydon (9.529-99), which Phoenix uses to try to persuade Achilles to resume his role as the defender of the Achaeans.

wall is not a casual choice might also be seen in the very careful narrative of the wall's construction itself. The action begins in 7, when Nestor counsels the Greeks to pause in the fighting, collect their dead onto a pyre, burn them, sort out the remains for eventual burial at home, then erect a fortification on top of the site of the pyre (7.327-43).

There has been a certain amount of discussion at this point in the text about Nestor's suggestion. Page asserts that common Greek practice was to bury the dead on the battlefield and that bringing home the ashes was a specifically fifth-century Athenian custom, indicating that this passage is a late (and probably Athenian) addition.⁴⁴ Certainly it appears that the poet believed that the Trojans buried their dead *in situ*. We hear about the mounds of Aisyyetes (2.793) and of the eponymous Ilos (10.415, 11.166), and Hector discusses at some length the possibility of the honorable burial of a defeated enemy in a mound on the Trojan shore (7.81-90). The behavior of the Achaeans throughout the rest of the *Iliad* agrees with that of the Trojans, from Andromache's description of Achilles' cremation and burial of her father, Eetion (6.416-20), to the elaborate description of the cremation of Patroclus (23.163-77, 236-57).

Scholarly opinion has traditionally wanted to see Nestor's proposal as if it were actually two, almost discrete, stages: first, to collect, cremate, and sort out the dead; second, to build the wall upon the mounded remains of the funeral pyre. If we read Nestor's plan as a unity, however, in which the actions in the first part are essential to the success of the second, I believe that we have a more coherent and intelligible picture, one that allows the text to explain itself without recourse to external information and that also allows us to understand just how carefully the poet has conceived of his wall.

Consider the Achaean position. Nestor has convinced them that they are in danger of losing their only means of retreat. The Achaeans agree with Nestor's assessment and decide that they must build a wall quickly. From our various details of the Achaean wall, we know that its basic materials are stone and wood over an earthen foundation. The Achaean (and the poet's) difficulty, then, lies in dealing with the very pre-wall vulnerability that informs both Thucydides' and Strabo's assumptions about the wall's construction: how to acquire these materials and set to work without betraying to the Trojans what they are about?

⁴⁴ Page 1959:323, citing Jacoby 1944.

Late in the *Iliad*, we see Achilles bid Agamemnon to order his people to prepare for Patroclus' funeral. His main directive is that they should bring timber for the pyre (23.49-50), which they do (23.110-26). Some of this wood is clearly meant as fuel for the fire. Some of it, however, is used to form a framework, *θεμείλια* (23.255), for the burial mound, to hold in the piled earth and perhaps stones.⁴⁵ It is significant for Nestor's proposal that the word *θεμείλια* has been used only once before in the *Iliad*, where it applies to the supports of timber (*φιτρῶν*) and stone (*λάων*) that form the lower course of the Achaean wall (12.28-29).

With many bodies lying exposed on the field near the end of Book 7, it would appear natural for the Achaeans to be seen gathering the traditional materials for burial—earth, stone, timbers—the very same materials that can be used for building a defensive wall. Following the customary sequence as we know it from the funerals of Patroclus and Hector, the dead would then be burned and a mound raised above them.⁴⁶ The Achaeans perform all of these actions, although with an ulterior motive, and the Trojans themselves even unknowingly help Nestor's plan by proposing a truce for the collecting and burying of the dead (7.394-96). Although the Trojans thus contribute to the illusion, there are still several problems left for the Achaeans. First, if contemporary practice, like later Greek practice, was not to bury the dead within the space of the living (certainly it seems that the Trojan dead are buried outside the walls), then something had to be done with the remains of the warriors burned on the pyre before construction could begin. Second, the work had to be done in such a way that the Trojans would not get wind of it too soon. These two problems are solved simultaneously when, to screen their movements, the Achaeans arrive at the pyre before dawn, remove the human remains, then set to work constructing their wall on the very “funeral mound” itself, employing building materials already in place (7.433-41).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Although the details of Patroclus' mound do not include this, Hector's mound is covered with heavy stones (24.797-98).

⁴⁶ Patroclus, as we know from 23.252-54, is not buried immediately. A mound is raised, however, in 23.255-57.

⁴⁷ For a more modern example of this sort of construction chicanery, see the story of Themistocles and the rebuilding of the walls of Athens in Thucydides 1.90-93. For more discussion and bibliography on Nestor's suggestion and on the building of the wall,

For all the care the poet lavishes on this wall, however, Achilles dismisses it, describing it accurately with its ditch and stakes, but saying that it will fail to keep Hector out and that only he could keep Hector in check (9.348-55). But even if Achilles mocks the wall, the poet links him strongly with his stone and timber substitute (12.10-12):

ὄφρα μὲν Ἐκτωρ ζῶς ἔην καὶ μῆνι' Ἀχιλλεύς
καὶ Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος ἀπόρθητος πόλις ἔπλεν,
τόφρα δὲ καὶ μέγα τείχος Ἀχαιῶν ἔμπεδον ἦεν.

So long as Hector lived, and Achilles was angry,
and the city of Lord Priam remained unsacked,
for so long the great wall of the Achaeans stood firm.

In these lines, the destiny of Achilles, his anger, and the wall are fatally intermingled: while Hector lives, so does Achilles; before Hector can die, Achilles must lose his anger at Agamemnon; when Hector dies, Achilles will die soon after; after Achilles dies, Troy will fall and, when Troy falls, so will the Achaean wall. If we remember that the Achaean wall is begun on a funeral pyre and constructed of the same materials as that pyre and tomb that are designed to burn the bodies and hold the bones both of Patroclus and Achilles, we see yet another possible—and melancholy—parallel.

Unfortunately for the Achaeans, Achilles' sneer that the wall will not hold back Hector has already begun to come true, and all too quickly. Even before Achilles had mocked the Achaean effort, Hector had called the fortifications ἀβλήχρ' οὐδενόσωρα "feeble things not worth a thought" (8.177-79), as he exhorted the Trojans to join him in assaulting them. Yet the wall is not so easily dismissed, and the combat sways back and forth before it and across it before the Trojans finally sweep over it like waves over the bulwarks of a ship (15.381-84). This image of rushing water that carries all before it is not an uncommon one in the *Iliad*. The Achaeans are likened to incoming surf (4.422-28), for instance, and Diomedes (5.87-92) and Ajax (11.492-95) are compared with rivers in spate. If we return to Book 7, however, we might see that the poet is employing the familiar simile in a design.

When the Achaeans are first constructing the wall, we are told that

Poseidon complains to Zeus about their work, saying that not only have the Achaeans neglected to make the proper sacrifices (7.450), as mentioned above, but that their wall will be more famous than the one that Poseidon and Apollo had built around Troy for Priam's father, Laomedon (7.451-53). We have seen how the poet can produce echoes of the Trojan wall in his Achaean wall. He can also employ it to evoke echoes of other elements of the *Iliad*, linking them with the present narrative in new and telling ways, and even bring back echoes of prior stories, such as that of Poseidon, Apollo, and Laomedon. By doing so, the poet can extend his narrative into the past, setting his current tale into a larger tradition, as well as displaying his knowledge of that larger tradition. The poet can also use the wall to tell us of the future, both directly and indirectly.

In Poseidon's complaint, we see all of these possible uses brought together in a few lines. First, there is another mirroring of the Achaean wall and the Trojan, this time in the matter of potential reputation. Second, when Poseidon mentions Laomedon's wall, we know from another part of the tradition that the wall that Laomedon had persuaded the two gods to construct was never paid for and, in return, Apollo put a plague upon Troy and Poseidon sent a tidal wave with a sea monster in it to destroy the people along the coast.⁴⁸ The plague that Apollo sends has its clear parallel in the later plague he visits upon the Achaeans in the opening of the *Iliad* (1.50-54). The monster sent by Poseidon was killed by Heracles, but Laomedon cheated him as he had the gods and, in revenge, Heracles returned to Troy with a small expedition and sacked the city,⁴⁹ a story that so prefigures what will happen to Troy in the future that it, along with the sack of Thebes, is mentioned several times in the *Iliad*.⁵⁰ The tidal wave that Poseidon sends appears again when Zeus consoles Poseidon by telling him that, when the Achaeans have departed, Poseidon is to demolish the wall, sweep it all into the sea, and cover the wide beach again with the sands (7.461-62). Thus, when the Trojans are described as if they are great waves

⁴⁸ See Apollodorus 2.5.9.

⁴⁹ Apollodorus 2.6.4. Poseidon reminds Apollo of Laomedon's behavior in 21.436-57, and Tlepolemus and Sarpedon discuss Heracles' sack of the city in 5.640-42, 648-51.

⁵⁰ See 5.640-42, 648-51, 14.249-61, 15.24-30, and 20.144-48 for various elements of the story of Heracles and Troy.

that sweep over the bulwark (τοῖχος) of a ship, the poet may be echoing the actions of Poseidon when he sent the tidal wave against Laomedon's people as well as when Poseidon will overwhelm the wall (τεῖχος) of the Achaeans.

But the poet's design is larger yet. When Hector urges his men on, it is because Apollo is moving before him, waving the aegis and, in a striking simile, overthrowing the Achaean wall like a child knocking over sandcastles on a beach (15.360-64). It is no wonder, in the midst of this wild Trojan current, that Ajax takes to the decks of the dry-docked Achaean ships like a man fleeing a flood (15.674-88). His call to the Achaeans to defend themselves reveals his understanding that their Achilles-substitute is now completely useless, as he ironically asks the Achaeans if they have some stronger wall to ward off destruction or some city nearby, fitted with towers (15.736-37).

Although the original wall, Achilles, is still out of the fighting, and his metaphysical counterpart cannot hold back the Trojan waves, Achilles' image is still a powerful weapon in itself. As he comments to Patroclus, the only reason that the Trojans are so close is that they have not seen the face of Achilles' helmet and that otherwise, appropriately enough for a tide forced to recede, they would be filling the gullies with their dead in their retreat (16.70-72). The success of Patroclus' ruse of wearing Achilles' armor proves Achilles' jeering only too true and the action moves from the Achaean wall to its mirroring Trojan one, then washes back again after the death of Patroclus. But Achilles, the original wall, has only to appear and stand, like his substitute, at the far side of the ditch, crying out, to bring the Trojans once more to a standstill (18.215-16). His attack the next day underscores even further his scorn of the Trojans as he drives large numbers of them into the river Scamander/Xanthus, choking its stream to the point at which the river begins to fight back, calling upon its brother river, Simoeis, and asking him to join floodwaters (21.313-23):

ἴστη δὲ μέγα κῦμα, πολὺν δ' ὄρουμαγδὸν ὄρινε
 φιτρῶν καὶ λάων, ἵνα παύσομεν ἄγριον ἄνδρα,
 ὃς δὴ νῦν κρατέει, μέμονεν δ' ὃ γε ἴσα θεοῖσι.
 φημί γὰρ οὔτε βίην χραισμησέμεν οὔτε τι εἶδος,
 οὔτε τὰ τεύχεα καλὰ, τὰ που μάλα νειόθι λίμνης
 κείσεθ' ὑπ' ἰλύος κεκαλυμμένα· κὰδ δέ μιν αὐτὸν
 εἰλύσω ψαμάθοισιν ἄλις χέραδος περιχεύας
 μυρίον, οὐδέ οἱ ὀστέ' ἐπιστήσονται Ἀχαιοὶ
 ἀλλέξαι· τόσσην οἱ ἄσιν καθύπερθε καλύψω.

αὐτοῦ οἱ καὶ σῆμα τετεύξεται, οὐδέ τί μιν χρεὼ
ἔσται τυμβοχόης, ὅτε μιν θάπτωσιν Ἀχαιοί.

and make a great wave, stir up a huge tumult
of timbers and stones, so that we stop this savage man,
who now is holding power, as strongly intent as the gods.
For I say that neither his strength nor any beauty will protect him
nor his fine armor, which will lie somewhere at the bottom of a pool,
hidden under the mud. I will cover him over
with sea sands, spreading over a thousand stones from the shingle,
nor shall the Achaeans be able to gather up his bones. Such shingle
shall I hide him with, from above.
And his grave-marker will be erected there, nor will he need
there to be any grave-mound, when the Achaeans hold his funeral.

When we compare these lines with those that open Book 12, in which we see a more developed description of the future destruction of the Achaean wall, we understand just how closely the poet has identified the wall with Achilles. In this passage, Poseidon and Apollo, as if seen from the distant future, have loosed all the waters of the local rivers, including Scamander and Simoeis, ὅθι πολλὰ βοάγρια καὶ τρυφάλεια / κάππεσον ἐν κονίησι—“where many oxhide shields and helmets have fallen in the mud” (12.22-23), and where (12.24-32)

τῶν πάντων ὁμόσε στόματ' ἔτραπε Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων,
ἐννήμαρ δ' ἐς τεῖχος ἔει ῥόον· ὕε δ' ἄρα Ζεὺς
συνεχές ὄφρα κε θᾶσσον ἀλίπλοα τείχεα θείη.
αὐτὸς δ' ἐννοσίγαιος ἔχων χεῖρεςσι τρίαιναν
ἤγειτ' ἐκ δ' ἄρα πάντα θεμεῖλια κύμασι πέμπε
φιτρῶν καὶ λάων, τὰ θέσαν μογέοντες Ἀχαιοί,
λεῖα δ' ἐποίησεν παρ' ἀγάρροον Ἑλλήσποντον,
αὐτίς δ' ἠίονα μεγάλην ψαμάθοισι κάλυψε,
τεῖχος ἀμαλδύνας· ποταμούςς δ' ἔτρεψε νέεσθαι
κὰρ ῥόον, ἧ περ πρόσθεν ἔεν καλλίρρον ὕδωρ.

Phoebus Apollo diverted the mouths of all to the same spot;
and he directed the current against the wall for nine days. Without
let-up, Zeus rained then, so as to turn the wall to seawrack more quickly.
The Earthshaker, holding the trident in his hands, guided things,
and so sent all the framework of timbers and stones into the waves
which the toiling Achaeans had set up,
and made smooth places by the swift-flowing Hellespont,
and covered the wide beach again with sand,

having destroyed the wall and turned the rivers to move
down the channel where the smooth-flowing water had run before.

The parallels abound, from the confluence of rivers, which includes the image of armor in mud, to the timbers and stones of which funeral mounds and walls are made, to the concealment of what stood there before, man or wall, to the total absence of any evidence, either to outshine Laomedon's wall or to stand as a memorial to the drowned Achilles.⁵¹

From the entry of Achilles into battle again in 19 to the conclusion of our *Iliad* with the raising of Hector's burial-mound, there is no more fighting at the Achaean wall, a fact that should not be surprising. It has fulfilled its function as the poet's temporary replacement for Achilles.⁵² Now the poet moves towards closure and the final fulfillment of the wrath, allowing Achilles to drive the Trojans back into their walls before finally killing the man whom he had only made wary before.

When Priam, in a mist provided by Hermes, leaves the Achaean encampment with his son's body, there is no mention of his departure through the wall, leaving us to believe that what Zeus had promised to Poseidon was already happening, caused not by floods, however, but by what Aristotle may have been suggesting: that when the wall is no longer useful for his telling of the anger of Achilles, the poet of our *Iliad* abandons it. As the poet had earlier informed us (12.10-12):

ὄφρα μὲν Ἑκτωρ ζῶδες ἔην καὶ μῆνι' Ἀχιλλεὺς
καὶ Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος ἀπόρθητος πόλις ἔπλεν,
τόφρα δὲ καὶ μέγα τείχος Ἀχαιῶν ἔμπεδον ἦεν.

⁵¹ We might even add to this the detail that, as the *Iliad* takes place in the ninth year of the war and Calchas' vision of the serpent, the mother bird, and her eight young is interpreted to portend that Troy will be taken at the end of the ninth year (2.301-30), so Apollo and Poseidon destroy Troy's mural echo in nine days and Achilles will die in the last year of the war.

⁵² It is interesting to see that, in Quintus of Smyrna's fourth-century A.D. *Fall of Troy*, the wall becomes a feature of the story only when Troy's ally, Eurypylus, grandson of Heracles, drives the Achaeans behind it in 7.132ff and Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, lands to aid the Achaeans and pushes the Trojans back from the wall in the fighting described in the first half of 8.

So long as Hector lived, and Achilles' anger,
and the city of Lord Priam remained unsacked,
for so long the great wall of the Achaeans stood firm.

With Hector dead and Achilles' wrath appeased, how long will the walls of Troy stand firm?⁵³

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⁵³ My thanks to John Miles Foley, Gregory Nagy, Joan O'Brien, and Carolyn Higbie for their constant encouragement and enthusiasm about this article.

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The Three Circuits of the Suitors: A Ring Composition in *Odyssey* 17-22

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Many that are first will be last, and last first.
(Mark 10:31)

Introduction

On three occasions in the *Odyssey*, Homer draws attention to the arrangement of the suitors as they sit in the hall of Odysseus' palace: first, when the disguised Odysseus passes from suitor to suitor begging for food; again, when each suitor in turn attempts to string Odysseus' bow; and, finally, when the suitors are slaughtered in succession at the hands of Odysseus and his small band of followers. On all three occasions—the description of which spans a long stretch of narrative (Books 17-22)—Homer seems to have precisely the same arrangement of suitors in mind. But whereas the sequence in which the suitors are mentioned is the same in the first two circuits, it is exactly reversed in the third.

The few meticulous scholars who have noticed this pattern have marshaled it as evidence for their hypothetical reconstructions of the layout of Odysseus' palace. But Homer's description of the layout of the palace is ambiguous, and the notorious failure of these scholars, both ancient and modern, to come to a consensus suggests that topographical verisimilitude was not Homer's primary concern here. Rather, I believe this pattern is an exceptionally well-crafted example of a type of patterning, pervasive in orally composed narrative, known to Hellenists as *hysteron-proteron* or *ring composition*. This is not to say that the pattern is merely a mnemonic aid, a means by which the poet may more easily arrange his material and store it in his mind; admittedly, such patterning held a practical function for an orally composing poet, but it also came to have an aesthetic value, providing for the audience a pleasing sense of recognition and ultimately a

satisfying sense of completion.

I shall suggest further that the pattern here focuses attention on the major theme of the latter half of the *Odyssey*: the theme of vengeance. The first two circuits are inextricably linked to the third inasmuch as they pose tests for the suitors—the first a test of their behavior toward strangers, the second of their worthiness (or lack thereof) to court Penelope—the failure of which leads directly to their slaughter in the third circuit. Antinous, the leader of the suitors, is approached last by the beggar, and he alone of the suitors abuses the beggar and refuses to give him food. Later, in the trial of the bow, he is again last in line; hence, he presumably poses the greatest threat to string it. It seems appropriate, then, that Antinous is the first of the suitors to die at the hands of Odysseus, deservedly with an arrow through his voracious throat. Conversely, Leodes, the most morally and physically innocuous of the suitors, is first in line to try the bow, and he clearly poses the least threat to string it. Again, it seems appropriate, then, that Leodes is the last of the suitors to die, and that he suffers a relatively humane death.

The Three Circuits of the Suitors

In Book 17.336-506, Homer describes Odysseus' arrival at the palace, disguised as a beggar. Odysseus takes the normal place of a beggar, sitting at the threshold (339), but Telemachus instructs him to approach all the suitors and ask for food (346=351). Odysseus proceeds from left to right (*endexia*), begging from each man (365). All the other suitors in turn (cf. *hexeiês* 17.450) give him bread and meat, and he is about to return to the threshold, when, last of all the suitors, he confronts Antinous (411-14). From him he receives different treatment: Antinous tells him to stand where he is, in the middle, apart from his table (447), threatens him with slavery (448-49), and even casts a footstool at him (462-65). Having thus ominously completed his circuit of begging, Odysseus returns to the threshold and sits down (466). Although of the suitors only Antinous is specifically named in this scene, the arrangement of the suitors as a group is very clear: they are arranged in a circuit with Antinous positioned at one end.

This begging scene serves as a preview of the next circuit of the suitors—the trial of the bow—four books later (21.141-268). Antinous

urges all his companions to rise and try the bow in turn (*hexeiês*), from left to right (*epidexia*), beginning from the place where wine is poured (141-42). Leodes, son of Oenops, who sits beside the wine krater in the innermost (*muchoitatos*) part of the hall, is the first to stand and try the bow, but it is too great a task for his tender hands (144-51). He yields and suggests that another of his comrades take it (152). Meanwhile, Antinous predicts that soon others of the suitors will string the bow (174), and he orders Melanthius to kindle a fire and bring a piece of fat so that the young men may try the bow and put an end to the contest (175-80). The young men proceed to do this, but with no greater success than Leodes (184-85). Antinous and Eurymachus, the leaders of the suitors, still hold back from trying the bow (186-87), but after a momentary shift in the narrative to the courtyard, where Odysseus reveals himself to his two trusted herdsmen (188-244), Eurymachus is described making trial of the bow, unsuccessfully (245-55). Antinous, presumably the only suitor remaining who has not yet tried the bow, excuses himself, claiming that it is a holy day and proposing that the trial of the bow be resumed on the next day after a sacrifice to Apollo (256-68). In sum, the circuit of the suitors' trial of the bow in this scene follows the same pattern—the same arrangement of the suitors, and in the same sequence—as the circuit of Odysseus' begging four books earlier. But here the individual suitors who compose the circuit are more fully fleshed out: Leodes is positioned at one end of the circuit, Eurymachus and then Antinous at the other.

The third circuit, the slaughter of the suitors, narrated at some length a book later (22.8-329), fleshes out the individual suitors in even greater detail. But the most remarkable characteristic of this last circuit is that, while the suitors' arrangement is the same, the sequence in which they are mentioned is an exact reversal of the previous two circuits. Antinous, last in the circuit of Odysseus' begging, and last in the trial of the bow, is the first to fall at Odysseus' hands (8-21). Eurymachus, the second from the last in the trial of the bow, is the second to die (44-88). Next to die, this time at Telemachus' hands, is Amphinomus, who is apparently positioned next to Eurymachus (89-96).¹ The bulk of the narrative of the death of the remaining suitors is presented by means of a framing device—a short,

¹ The proximity of the two suitors is implied at 18.394-98, where Odysseus, in an attempt to escape the footstool that Eurymachus casts at him, seeks protection at Amphinomus' knees.

generic description of suitors as they fall one by one (116-18; 307-9)—within which are described in more detail the deaths of individual suitors: Demoptolemus, Euryades, Elatus, Peisander, Eurydamas, Amphimedon, Polybus, Ctesippus, Agelaus, and Leocritus.² After the deaths of all the other suitors, only Leodes remains; he who was first in the trial of the bow is last of the suitors to die (310-29).

Topographical Layout

The pattern of these three circuits has not escaped the notice of those whose concern it has been to reconstruct the architectural layout of Odysseus' palace. But if the resulting confusion and disagreement about the layout of the palace among scholars, both ancient and modern, is any indication, Homer was not overly concerned here with topography. One may compare the very different hypothetical reconstructions of the arrangement of the suitors within the hall proposed by Bassett (1919) and Bérard (1954), though both are based on the same textual evidence. The two most perplexing difficulties lie in the meanings of the adverbs *endexia* (17.365) and *epidexia* (21.141) applied to the circulation among the suitors of the beggar and the bow, and of the adjective *muchoitatos* (21.146) applied to the suitor Leodes. From whose perspective does the beggar, or bow, pass “toward the right?” With reference to what is Leodes the “innermost”? These questions were posed as early as the ancient scholia to the *Odyssey* (on 17.365, 21.141-42, 146), and there has been no consensus to date.³

Homer does not appear to have been concerned, then, with the *absolute* position of the suitors within the hall; the description of the first two circuits is ambiguous, and in the third there is no reference to their

² On the symmetry of this scene of slaughter, see Fenik 1974:146-48, 192-207.

³ The scholia understand ἐνδέξια and ἐπιδέξια to mean from the suitors' perspective, as do Bassett (1919:297) and Braunlich (1936); Bérard (1954:14-16) and Stanford (1959:21.141n.) take the opposite view. The absurdity of such overly literal-minded readings of Homer is nowhere more apparent than in Fernández-Galiano's summary, in the newest commentary on the *Odyssey*, of the endless and sometimes acerbic debate over the nature of the contest of the bow and the general layout of Odysseus' palace (Russo et al. 1992:133-47, 210-17).

absolute position. Whether we place Antinous on the left or the right of the entrance, or whether we visualize Leodes at the end of a semicircle or at the end of a straight row, is of little importance. Homer was, however, concerned with the *relative* position of the suitors, for on all three occasions on which Homer mentions their arrangement relative to one another, this arrangement is precisely the same. How do we explain this careful and apparently deliberate patterning, if not in terms of topography?

Ring Structures in Greek Epic

I suggest that Homer's close attention to the arrangement and sequence of the suitors in these three circuits arises from the oral nature of this epic's composition and performance. Patterning of this sort is pervasive in oral poetry. One may include the pattern of these three circuits—the first two following the same sequence, the third an exact reversal of the preceding two—among the many examples in early Greek epic of the well-known devices of hysteron-proteron and ring composition. By hysteron-proteron, I mean a pattern in which the last mentioned element of one sequence becomes the first mentioned in the next (ABBA, ABCCBA, ABCDDCBA, etc.); ring composition is similar but is generally understood to include a central core (AXA, ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.).⁴

For example, there are many occasions in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on which a series of questions is answered in exactly the reverse order: Antinous' three questions to Noemon (*Od.* 4.642-56); Hecabe's several questions to Hector (*Il.* 6.254-85); and, in the most elaborate example of this device, Odysseus' seven questions to his mother Anticleia in Hades (*Od.* 11.170-203; quoted from Allen 1917-19):

“ἀλλ’ ἄγε μοι τόδε εἰπὲ καὶ ἀτρεκέως κατάλεξον·
 τίς νύ σε κῆρ ἐδάμασσε τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο
 ἢ δολιχὴ νοῦσος, ἧ ἼΑρτεμις ἰοχέαιρα
 οἷς ἀγανῶς βελέεσσιν ἐποιχομένη κατέπεφνε;

⁴ On ring structures in Greek epic, see Bassett 1920, 1938:119-28; Sheppard 1922; Myres 1932, 1952; van Otterlo 1944a, 1944b, 1948; Notopoulos 1951; Whitman 1958:249-84; van Groningen 1960:51-56; Hainsworth 1966; Gaisser 1969; Lohmann 1970:12-30, 209-12, 1988:25-81; Niles 1979a; Thalmann 1984:6-32; Parks 1988; Edwards 1991:44-48.

εἰπέ δέ μοι πατρός τε καὶ υἱέος, ὃν κατέλειπον,
ἢ ἔτι πάρ κείνοισιν ἐμὸν γέρας, ἢέ τις ἤδη
ἀνδρῶν ἄλλος ἔχει, ἐμὲ δ' οὐκέτι φασὶ νέεσθαι.
εἰπέ δέ μοι μνηστῆς ἀλόχου βουλήν τε νόον τε,
ἢέ μένει παρὰ παιδὶ καὶ ἔμπεδα πάντα φυλάσσει
ἢ ἤδη μιν ἔγρημεν Ἀχαιῶν ὃς τις ἄριστος.”

“Ὡς ἐφάμην, ἢ δ' αὐτίκ ἀμείβετο πότνια μήτηρ·
“καὶ λίην κείνη γε μένει τετληῶτι θυμῷ
σοῖσιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν· οἴζυραὶ δέ οἱ αἰεὶ
φθίνουσιν νύκτες τε καὶ ἡμέματα δάκρυ χεούση.
σὸν δ' οὐ πῶ τις ἔχει καλὸν γέρας, ἀλλὰ ἔκηλος
Τηλέμαχος τεμένεα νέμεται καὶ δαίτας ἔϊσας
δαίνυται, ἅς ἐπέοικε δικασπόλον ἀνδρ' ἀλεγύνειν·
πάντες γάρ καλέουσι. πατήρ δέ σός αὐτόθι μίμνει
ἀγρῷ, οὐδὲ πόλινδε κατέρχεται· οὐδέ οἱ εὐναὶ
δέμνια καὶ χλαῖναι καὶ ῥήγεα σιγαλόεντα,
ἀλλ' ὃ γε χεῖμα μὲν εὔδει ὄθι δμῶες ἐνὶ οἴκῳ
ἐν κόνι ἄγχι πυρός, κακὰ δὲ χροὶ εἶματα εἶται·
αὐτὰρ ἐπὴν ἔλθῃσι θέρος τεθαλυῖά τ' ὀπώρη,
πάντῃ οἱ κατὰ γουνὸν ἄλωνς οἶνοπέδοιο
φύλλων κεκλιμένων χθαμαλαὶ βεβλήγεται εὐναί·
ἐνθ' ὃ γε κείτ' ἀχέων, μέγα δὲ φρεσὶ πένθος ἀέξει
σὸν νόστον ποθέων· χαλεπὸν δ' ἐπὶ γῆρας ἰκάνει.
οὕτω γάρ καὶ ἐγὼν ὀλόμην καὶ πότμον ἐπέσπον·
οὔτ' ἐμέ γ' ἐν μεγάροισιν εὐσκοπος ἰοχέαιρα
οἷς ἀγανοῖς βελέεσσιν ἐποιχομένη κατέπεφνεν,
οὔτε τις οὖν μοι νοῦσος ἐπήλυθεν, ἢ τε μάλιστα
τηκεδόνι στυγερῇ μελέων ἐξείλετο θυμόν·
ἀλλὰ με σός τε πόθος σά τε μήδεα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ,
σὴ τ' ἀγανοφροσύνη μελιηδέα θυμόν ἀπηύρα.”

“But come now, tell me this, and give me an accurate answer.
What doom of death that lays men low has been your undoing?
Was it a long sickness, or did Artemis of the arrows
come upon you with her painless shafts, and destroy you?
And tell me of my father and son whom I left behind. Is
my inheritance still with them, or does some other
man hold them now, and thinks I will come no more? Tell me
about the wife I married, what she wants, what she is thinking,
and whether she stays fast by my son, and guards everything,
or if she has married the best man among the Achaeans.”

So I spoke, and my queenly mother answered me quickly:
 “All too much with enduring heart she does wait for you
 there in your own palace, and always with her the wretched
 nights and the days also waste her away with weeping.
 No one yet holds your fine inheritance, but in freedom
 Telemachus administers your allotted lands, and apports
 the equal feasts, work that befits a man with authority
 to judge, for all call him in. Your father remains, on the estate
 where he is, and does not go to the city. There is no bed there
 nor is there bed clothing nor blankets nor shining coverlets,
 but in the winter time he sleeps in the house, where the thralls do,
 in the dirt next to the fire, and with foul clothing upon him;
 but when the summer comes and the blossoming time of harvest,
 everywhere he has places to sleep on the ground, on fallen
 leaves in piles along the rising ground of his orchard,
 and there he lies, grieving, and the sorrow grows big within him
 as he longs for your homecoming, and harsh old age is on him.
 And so it was with me also and that was the reason I perished,
 nor in my palace did the lady of arrows, well-aiming,
 come upon me with her painless shafts, and destroy me,
 nor was I visited by sickness, which beyond other
 things takes the life out of the body with hateful weakness,
 but, shining Odysseus, it was my longing for you, your cleverness
 and your gentle ways, that took the sweet spirit of life from me.”

(Lattimore 1967:172-73)

In diagrammatic form, this elaborate hysteron-proteron may be viewed as follows:

- A - What killed you? (171)
- B - A long sickness? (172)
- C - Or Artemis with her arrows? (172-73)
- D - How is my father? (174)
- E - How is my son? (174)
- F - Are my possessions safe? (175-76)
- G - Has my wife been faithful? (177-79)

- G - Your wife has been faithful. (181-83)
- F - Your possessions are safe. (184)
- E - Your son is thriving. (184-87)
- D - Your father is alive but in poor condition. (187-96)
- C - Artemis did not kill me with her arrows. (198-99)
- B - Nor did a sickness kill me. (200-201)

A - But my longing for you killed me. (202-3)

A more common type of ring structure is the envelopment of a digression from the main narrative—a paradigm, a simile, a proverbial expression, or some explanatory detail—by a thematic or verbal frame, or even by multiple frames. So in *Iliad* 6.123-43, the narrative of Diomedes' challenge to Glaucus, the paradigmatic story of Lycurgus is framed by three concentric rings (quoted from Monro and Allen 1920):

“τίς δὲ σύ ἐσσι, φέριστε, καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων;
οὐ μὲν γάρ ποτ' ὄπωπα μάχη ἐνι κυδιανείρῃ
τὸ πρὶν· ἀτὰρ μὲν νῦν γε πολὺ προβέβηκας ἀπάντων
σῶ θάρσει, ὃ τ' ἐμὸν δολιχόσκιον ἔγχος ἔμεινας·
δυστήνων δὲ τε παῖδες ἐμῷ μένει ἀντιώωσιν.
εἰ δέ τις ἀθανάτων γε κατ' οὐρανοῦ εἰλήλουθας,
οὐκ ἂν ἔγωγε θεοῖσιν ἐπουρανίοισι μαχοίμην.
Οὐδὲ γάρ οὐδὲ Δρύαντος υἱός, κρατερὸς Λυκούργος,
δὴν ἦν, ὅς ῥα θεοῖσιν ἐπουρανίοισιν ἔριζεν·
ὅς ποτε μαινομένοιο Διωνύσοιο τιθήνας
σεύε κατ' ἠγάθεον Νυσηΐον· αἱ δ' ἅμα πᾶσαι
θύσθλα χαμαὶ κατέχευαν, ὑπ' ἀνδροφόνοιο Λυκούργου
θεινόμεναι βουπλήγι· Διώνυσος δὲ φοβηθεὶς
δύσεθ' ἄλῶς κατὰ κῦμα, Θέτις δ' ὑπεδέξατο κόλπῳ
δειδιότα· κρατερὸς γὰρ ἔχε τρόμος ἀνδρὸς ὁμοκλή.
τῷ μὲν ἔπειτ' ὀδύσαντο θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζῶντες,
καί μιν τυφλὸν ἔθηκε Κρόνου πάϊς· οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτι δὴν
ἦν, ἐπεὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ἀπήχθετο πᾶσι θεοῖσιν·
οὐδ' ὄν ἐγὼ μακάρεσσι θεοῖς ἐθέλοιμι μάχεσθαι.
εἰ δέ τις ἐσσι βροτῶν, οἷ ἄρουρης καρπὸν ἔδουσιν,
ἄσσον ἴθι, ὥς κεν θᾶσσον ὀλέθρου πείραθ' ἵκηαι.”

“Who among mortal men are you, good friend? Since never before have I seen you in the fighting where men win glory, yet now you have come striding far out in front of all others in your great heart, who have dared stand up to my spear far-shadowing. Yet unhappy are those whose sons match warcraft against me. But if you are some one of the immortals come down from the bright sky, know that I will not fight against any god of the heaven, since even the son of Dryas, Lycurgus the powerful, did not live long; he who tried to fight with the gods of the bright sky, who once drove the fosterers of rapturous Dionysus

headlong down the sacred Nyseian hill, and all of them
 shed and scattered their wands on the ground, stricken with an ox-goad
 by murderous Lycurgus, while Dionysus in terror
 dived into the salt surf, and Thetis took him to her bosom,
 frightened, with the strong shivers upon him at the man's blustering.
 But the gods who live at their ease were angered with Lycurgus,
 and the son of Kronos struck him to blindness, nor did he live long
 afterwards, since he was hated by all the immortals.
 Therefore neither would I be willing to fight with the blessed
 gods; but if you are one of those mortals who eat what the soil yields,
 come nearer, so that sooner you may reach your appointed destruction."
 (Lattimore 1951:156-57)

In diagrammatic form, this ring composition may be viewed as follows:

- A - Are you a mortal? (123-27)
- B - I will not fight with gods. (128-29)
- C - For Lycurgus fought with gods and did not live long. (130-31)

- X - Tale of Lycurgus. (132-37)

- C - Lycurgus fought with gods and did not live long. (138-40)
- B - I will not fight with gods. (141)
- A - But if you are mortal, prepare to die. (142-43)

Such patterns—rings arranged around a central core—are pervasive in Homer in both their simple (AXA) and complex (ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.) forms; they are clearly important structuring devices of orally composed narrative.⁵

But perhaps more similar to the situation in the three circuits of the

⁵ The simple form (AXA) may be observed at *Iliad* 2.100-109, 299-332, 487-760; 4.473-89; 5.49-58, 59-68, 69-75, 76-84, 533-40, 541-60; 6.12-19, 20-28, 150-211; 9.434-45, 445-84, 485-95, 512-23; 10.254-72; 11.101-21, 122-27, 765-90; 12.378-86; 13.170-82, 363-72; 14.110-27, 313-28, 442-48, 489-500; 15.14-33, 429-35, 445-51; 16.569-80, 593-98, 603-7; 17.293-303; 18.37-49, 478-608; 19.85-138; 20.213-41, 381-88; 23.740-49; 24.524-50; *Odyssey* 4.351-60; 5.118-29, 285-376; 14.321-33, 468-503; 19.1-52. The complex forms (ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.) may be observed at *Iliad* 2.23-34; 4.370-400; 5.800-813; 6.407-32; 7.123-60; 9.524-99; 11.655-764; 14.42-51; 15.502-13, 596-603; 17.19-32; 18.22-64, 393-409; 22.378-94; 23.69-92, 306-48, 457-72, 570-85, 624-50; 24.253-64, 599-620; *Odyssey* 7.186-225; 11.492-507; 14.115-47; 15.222-58; 19.386-470; 21.8-42.

suitors under consideration are those occurrences of a ring structure in which a list of names is presented and then the sequence of that list reversed in the subsequent narrative. So in Hesiod's *Theogony* (507-34) the offspring of Iapetus are listed—Atlas, Menoetius, Prometheus, and Epimetheus—followed by a longer narrative of how each ran afoul of Zeus in roughly reverse order.⁶ Even more similar in tone and in setting to the circuits of the suitors is Homer's description of the chariot race at Patroclus' funeral games (*Il.* 23.288-536). Just as in the Odyssean trial of the bow, Leodes, son of Oenops, the first to rise up to make an attempt, is the last to be slaughtered by Odysseus, so in the Iliadic chariot race, Eumelus, son of Admetus, the first to rise up to join the contest, is the last to arrive at the finish line.

Ring Structures in Comparative Oral Traditions

Such patterning is not restricted to Greek epic. Other oral traditions show a similar tendency to structure narratives by means of hysteron-proteron and ring composition. The so-called envelope pattern in Anglo-Saxon has received much attention,⁷ and ring structures of some sort—also called annular systems, framing devices, triptych structures, binary ordering, *inclusio*, and *chiasmus*—have been identified in the oral and residually oral traditions of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), Old French epic, African epic, the traditional Scottish ballad, and South Slavic epic.⁸ Since South Slavic epic poetry, recorded even in the present generation, is demonstrably orally composed and performed, I shall draw from it some analogues to the ancient Greek examples mentioned above.

To the three Homeric examples of hysteron-proteron above may be

⁶ "Roughly reverse" because Prometheus' position is displaced, reserved for last, since his story is selected for longer treatment.

⁷ On ring structures in Anglo-Saxon, see Bartlett 1935, Heatt 1975, Tonsfeldt 1977, Rosier 1977, Niles 1979b, 1983:152-62, Parks 1988, Lord 1991.

⁸ Representative studies on ring structures, from an oralist's perspective, include: for Old Testament, Fishbane 1975; for New Testament, Lohr 1961; for Old French epic, Niles 1973; for African epic, Okpewho 1979:194-201; for the traditional Scottish ballad, Buchan 1972:87-144; for South Slavic epic, Foley 1983:194-99, Lord 1986a:53-64, 1986b:11-12.

compared a clear case of hysteron-proteron (ABCDDCBA) from the South Slavic Christian song *Marko Drinks Wine during Ramazan* (1-11):⁹

Car Suleman jasak učinio:
 da s' ne pije uz ramazan vino,
 da s' ne nose zelene dolame,
 da s' ne pašu sablje okovane,
 da s' ne igra kolom uz kadune.
 Marko igra kolom uz kadune;
 Marko paše sablju okovanu,
 Marko nosi zelenu dolamu,
 Marko pije uz ramazan vino;
 Još nagoni odže i adžije
 Da i oni s njime piju vino.

Tsar Sulejman issued an order;
 That none drink wine during Ramazan,
 That none wear green dolamas,
 That none strap on plated sabers,
 That none dance the kolo with women.
 Marko danced the kolo with women,
 Marko strapped on a plated saber,
 Marko wore a green dolama,
 Marko drank wine during Ramazan;
 Even more, he urged the hodjas and adjijas
 To drink wine with him.

Another example of a ring structure, this time—as in the aforementioned Homeric scene of Diomedes and Glaucus—a true ring composition with central core, may be observed in the South Slavic Christian song *Marko and the Daughter of the Arab King*. The song begins with a series of questions posed to Marko by his mother (1-5):

Pita majka Kraljevića Marka:
 “Ja moj sinko, Kraljeviću Marko,
 što ti gradiš mloge zadužbine?
 Il' si te ko bogu zgriješio,
 il' si ludo blago zadobio?”

⁹ Quotations from the South Slavic narratives collected by Vuk Karadžić are taken from Foley 1983.

Kraljević Marko's mother asked:
 "O my son, Kraljević Marko,
 Why are you building so many memorials?
 Have you sinned grievously against God,
 Or have you come into unexpected riches?"

There follows Marko's long account (80 verses) of how he killed six Arabs, was overpowered, imprisoned for seven years, and rescued by the daughter of the Arab king, whose kindness he repaid by beheading her. This account is then framed at the end of the song by Marko's direct response to his mother's opening questions (84-86):

"Tu sam, mati, bogu zgriješio,
 a veliko blago zadobio,
 te ja gradim mloge zadužbine."

"So, mother, I have sinned against God,
 And come into great riches,
 And thus I am building many memorials."¹⁰

Another example of ring composition, one quite similar in its length, setting, and tone to the three circuits of suitors under consideration, may be observed in the assembly scene that opens Avdo Medjedović's *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* (37-1089).¹¹ First the elders and nobles gathered at Kanidža, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head, are listed and described at great length. Then Hasan Pasha Tiro, concerned about the despondence of Smailagić Meho, sets the epic in motion by ordering Cifrić Hasanaga, Meho's uncle, to question the youth. Cifrić Hasanaga carries out Hasan Pasha Tiro's orders. In response to his uncle's questions, Meho delivers a long and passionate speech detailing the causes of his despondence: he is tired of being treated as a youth, as a mere servant to his uncle and father, and he wants to participate in the heroic ventures of the warriors. His uncle Cifrić Hasanaga responds at length, conceding that his nephew has come of age. Finally, Hasan Pasha Tiro jumps to his feet and orders that a decree be fashioned stating that the command pass to young Meho. All the elders and nobles gathered at Kanidža sign the decree and bid farewell as the assembly

¹⁰ On this ring's aesthetic function within the song, see further Foley 1983:198-99.

¹¹ Edited and translated in Lord and Bynum 1974.

breaks up.

The narrative of this assembly is based on a pattern that begins by concentrating on the elders and nobles, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head, and proceeds in a descending order of hierarchy to Cifrić Hasanaga, and finally to Meho, the youngest member in the assembly, who has as yet played no part. But Meho's speech, the centerpiece of the ring, provides the momentum for the entire epic, resulting as it does in the youth's elevation from a mere servant of his father and uncle to the central hero of the epic. After Meho's speech the ring pattern makes its way back up the hierarchical ladder through Cifrić Hasanaga to Hasan Pasha Tiro at the head of the elders and nobles, but this time each responds positively to the new hero.¹²

In diagrammatic form, this opening assembly scene of Avdo Medjedović's *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* (37-1089) may be viewed as follows:

A - Elders and nobles at Kanidža, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head	[Descending Hierarchy]
B - Hasan Pasha Tiro	
C - Cifrić Hasanaga	

X - Meho's speech (elevation of Meho from mere servant ["a girl"] to central hero of the epic)

C - Cifrić Hasanaga	
B - Hasan Pasha Tiro	[Ascending Hierarchy]
A - Elders and nobles at Kanidža	

The Mnemonic, Tectonic, Aesthetic, and Thematic Function of Ring Composition

Patterning of this kind, then, seems to be an inherent characteristic of oral narrative, visible in many oral and residually oral traditions. But it is surely too crude to regard such patterning as merely a mnemonic aid, a useful tool for a poet forced by the exigencies of oral performance to concentrate all his attention—and his audience's attention—on a single

¹² On the ring structure of this assembly scene, see Lord 1986a:53-64.

episode at a time. For ring structure is a tectonic as well as mnemonic principle. It is perhaps the most important structuring device of oral narrative, building bridges between the many components of the larger poem, or, to use a different metaphor, weaving the digressionary material into the larger fabric of the narrative.

Moreover, what was perhaps in origin a mnemonic and tectonic device has evolved into an aesthetic principle as well, becoming a desirable and expected pattern of oral narrative. It concentrates the audience's attention on an individual episode, rounding off its borders by means of the rings, and thus providing for the audience a satisfying sense of recognition, enclosure, and completion. As a modern audience, steeped in a strictly literary tradition, we easily forget that, whereas a reading audience can see and anticipate divisions of narrative by noting paragraph structure on a printed page, and can likewise anticipate the winding down of a narrative by noting where the text ends, the audience of an oral performance relies on such devices as ring composition to perform these same functions.

I suggest further that this patterning is not only mnemonic, tectonic, and aesthetic; it is also a thematic device. The rings, often multiple rings, form a terrace leading down to a central core, focusing attention on that core, foregrounding it, and highlighting it. Often this core is the central thematic event not only of the single episode but also of a larger section of narrative, and even of an entire epic. It is often the thematic pivot around which a large stretch of narrative revolves.

So the central core of the complex ring structure of the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo* is the description of Apollo's birth, the central event of the hymn (Niles 1979a). So the central core of the ring structure of the Jacob Cycle in *Genesis* is the narrative of Joseph's birth, the architectonic and thematic pivot of the Jacob Cycle (Fishbane 1975:32). So the central core of the complex ring structure in the gospel of Matthew is the great discourse on the nature of the Kingdom, the pivot around which revolve the other sayings and deeds of Jesus (Lohr 1961:427-30). So the concentric rings of the *Chanson de Roland* terrace down to the central event of the epic, highlighting the lament for the dead Roland (Niles 1973:7). So, as described above, the core of the long assembly scene at the beginning of the *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* is Meho's pivotal speech, which turns the ring back up the ascending hierarchy, marking his shift from an insignificant youth to the central hero of the epic, and thus motivating the entire subsequent tale.

A Ring Composition in *Odyssey* 21-22

What, then, is the central core of the ring structure formed by the three circuits of the suitors in the *Odyssey*? I suggest that the central core lies between the second and third circuits. The first circuit—Odysseus' begging—is a preview, an anticipatory doublet, of the second—the trial of the bow. Both circuits follow the same sequence up an ascending hierarchy of the suitors, and together they function thematically as a testing of the suitors, the begging circuit revealing their failure to treat strangers properly, the circuit of the bow revealing their unworthiness to court Penelope. The third circuit—the slaughter of the suitors—reverses the sequence, going back down a descending hierarchy of the suitors as each receives his just deserts. The core—the pivot around which the sequence revolves—is the 171-verse section between the second and third circuits, during which Odysseus himself strings the bow, shoots the arrow through the axes, bares himself of his rags, and takes up position at the threshold (21.270-22.7). This is the pivotal scene of the *Odyssey*, the moment of stasis as it were, the culmination of the themes of return and testing that precede and the inception of the theme of vengeance that follows.¹³ This is, of course, not a novel idea; Plato seems to have perceived the central position of this scene in his dialogue *Ion* (535b), where Socrates queries the rhapsode Ion about his performance of Homeric epic, in effect invoking the whole *Odyssey* by summarizing this very scene: how Odysseus leapt upon the threshold, identified himself to the suitors, and poured out the arrows in front of his feet.

In diagrammatic form, this ring of the second and third circuits of the suitors may be viewed as follows:

Trial of the Bow

A - Leodes (21.144-66)	
B - Other Suitors (21.167-87)	[Ascending
C - Eurymachus (21.245-55)	Hierarchy]
D - Antinous (21.256-69)	

X - Odysseus (21.270-22.7: Odysseus strings bow, shoots arrow through axes,

¹³ Another moment of stasis in the *Odyssey*—Eurykleia's recognition of Odysseus as she prepares to wash his feet—is also framed by a complex ring (19.386-470).

bares himself of rags, and takes up position at threshold; elevation of Odysseus from beggar to central hero of epic)

Slaughter of the Suitors

D - Antinous (22.8-21)	
C - Eurymachus (22.44-88)	[Descending
B - Other Suitors (22.89-309)	Hierarchy]
A - Leodes (22.310-29)	

This ring structure illustrates with stimulating intensity and vivid concreteness the theme of vengeance worked out in the dénouement of the *Odyssey*. He who has the greatest resources but alone of the suitors refuses to give food to the beggar, and he who is most capable of stringing the bow but alone of the suitors does not attempt it, is deservedly the first to be slaughtered. The morally and physically innocuous suitor who holds the position at the other end of the circuit is the last to die. Truly the structural core of this ring is also its thematic core.

The Thematic Relationship between the Circuits of the Suitors

The language of the epic explicates the thematic relationship between the circuits, namely, that the behavior of the suitors in the first two circuits leads to their slaughter in the third. The first, the circuit of Odysseus' begging, is presented within the framework of a testing of the suitors. Athena, the divinity behind most of Odysseus' actions, spurs him on to beg for food from the suitors, in order that he might find out who is just and who is lawless (οἳ τινές εἰσιν ἐναίσιμοι οἳ τ' ἀθέμιστοι 17.363). More ominously, this testing is an avatar of a common theme in Greek myth, that of a theoxeny, in which a divinity in disguise visits mortals in order to make a test of their hospitality. This theme of theoxeny runs through the entire tale of Odysseus' return,¹⁴ but it surfaces most noticeably in this scene of Odysseus' begging; for here the suitors themselves raise the possibility that the beggar may be a god in disguise, come to make a test of them (17.483-

¹⁴ For other avatars of the theme of theoxeny in Greek myth, see Burnett 1970; for Odysseus' return as a theoxeny, see Kearns 1982, Reece 1993:181-87.

87; quoted from Allen 1917-19):

“Ἄντινο’, οὐ μὲν κάλ’ ἔβαλες δύστηνον ἀλήτην,
οὐλόμεν’, εἰ δὴ πού τις ἐπουράνιος θεός ἐστι.
καί τε θεοὶ ξείνοισιν ἐοικότες ἀλλοδαποῖσι,
παντοῖοι τελέθοντες, ἐπιστροφῶσι πόληας,
ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν τε καὶ εὐνομίην ἐφορῶντες.”

“Antinous, you did badly to hit the unhappy vagabond:
a curse on you, if he turns out to be some god from heaven.
For the gods do take on all sorts of transformations, appearing
as strangers from elsewhere, and thus they range at large through the
cities,
watching to see which men keep the laws, and which are violent.”

(Lattimore 1967:265)

The last of the suitors in this circuit, Antinous, most blatantly fails the test. He holds the highest position in the suitors’ hierarchy; he is the best (ὄριστος 17.416) of the Achaeans and should by all rights give more than the others (τῷ σε χρῆ δόμεναι καὶ λώϊον ἢ ἐπερ ἄλλοι σίτου 17.417-18). But his mind does not match his appearance (οὐκ ἄρα σοί γ’ ἐπὶ εἶδει καὶ φρένες ἦσαν 17.454); he tells the beggar to stand away from his table (17.447), and, in a symbolically powerful gesture, he takes a footstool, an implement associated in normal circumstances with proper hospitality and peaceful banqueting, and casts it (βάλε 17.462) at the beggar. This perversion of proper hospitality by Antinous, with its symbolic transformation of peace into war, of banquet into battle, links this circuit inextricably to the third, the suitors’ slaughter. For Odysseus immediately curses Antinous, calling upon the gods and furies to avenge him with his death (17.475-76); and Penelope’s subsequent curse even more explicitly anticipates the circuit of slaughter (17.494):

“αἶθ’ οὕτως αὐτόν σε βάλοι κλυτότοξος Ἀπόλλων.”

“Oh that bow-famed Apollo would strike [βάλοι] Antinous.”

Indeed Apollo does: just as Antinous had cast (βάλε 17.462) at Odysseus with the footstool, so does Odysseus cast (βάλε 22.15) at Antinous with an arrow that pierces his throat, even as he sits unsuspecting at the feast.

Antinous dies an appropriate death, grotesquely defiling the feast—a feast that he has already perverted—with his own blood (22.15-21).

The second circuit of the suitors, the trial of the bow, is even more inextricably linked to the third. As the narrator predicts, Antinous, who hopes to string the bow and shoot an arrow through the axes, is destined to be the first to taste an arrow from the hands of Odysseus (21.96-100). Leodes, the soothsayer, upon his failure to string the bow, predicts that it will deprive many men of their lives (21.153-56). And Odysseus, upon successfully stringing the bow, springs to the threshold and announces the end of the contest (22.5); now the arrows will find another mark that no man has ever hit (22.6-7). Odysseus' fatal announcement is the transition between the second and third circuits of the suitors. It is the architectonic and thematic pivot of this complex ring structure. It is the epic's central moment of stasis.

As already noted, the sequence of the third circuit, the slaughter of the suitors, is an exact reversal of the previous two. The moral implications resound. Leodes ("Tender"), son of Oenops ("Wine-Face"), who was the first to try the bow, is the most morally innocuous and physically impotent of the suitors, a harmless wine-bibber, one who has stationed himself in an advantageous position beside the wine krater, an ineffective participant in the trial of the bow, whose hands are weak and soft. His claim to amnesty is based on his role as a soothsayer, who did not participate in the crimes of the other suitors (21.144-51; 22.310-19). Hence, Leodes is deservedly the last of the suitors to die, and his death is mercifully swift (22.326-29). Eurymachus ("Broad-Fighter") and Antinous ("Counter-Minded"), who were the last of the suitors in line to try the bow, hold the position at the other end of the ascending hierarchy. They are the most noble and powerful of the suitors but also the most evil and dangerous, Antinous blatantly unjust and shameless, Eurymachus surreptitiously wicked. They are deservedly the first of the suitors to be slaughtered; and their deaths, appropriately the only two bow-slayings described, are presented in lurid detail. Thus, from a moral and thematic perspective as well as from a

structural one, the first has been last, and the last first.¹⁵

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