

Word, Breath, and Vomit: Oral Competition in Old English and Old Norse Literature

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Study of orality has been fixed on the ephemeral instead of on the physical, on will-o'-the-wisps like the “theme” instead of on the mouth and the ear.¹ Walter Ong notices that “when all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, ... interpersonal relations are kept high—both attractions and, even more, antagonisms” (1982:45). Certainly in traditional works the causes of misfortune are usually centered in another person, so that rage is more easily directed and “solutions” to trials more easily found by acting upon the body of someone else.² The mouth figures in such acts: “reciprocal name-calling” sessions are “standard in oral societies across the world” (Ong 1982:44), and, if one looks at the anatomy of orality more particularly, one finds that the word connects with the body directly.

In oral society (and in literate, but more secretly), the individual perceives the speech (and oral biography) of another as a physical and interior object or organ that makes language. This figure is a sort of totem. In Christian thinking, it becomes Augustine’s *homo interior* (*De magistro* i.2; Derrida 1978:180).³ In order to combat this secondary person inside

¹ For analysis of the “theme,” see John Miles Foley’s studies of oral composition (1990:330-35; 1991:17, 33-36). See also Paul Zumthor (1984:81), and cf. Alain Renoir (1988:96-102, 107-32), who discusses the theme of “The Hero on the Beach” in *Beowulf*. I thank Sarah Higley for many helpful suggestions concerning this article.

² For verbal competition in heroic literature, see Parks 1990:25, 48.

³ I refer to the church fathers by book, chapter, and paragraph (where appropriate); to Raymond of Capua by book, chapter, and paragraph in the *Acta Sanctorum* for April, volume three; to Old English poetry (except for *Beowulf*) by line numbers in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*; to *Beowulf* by line numbers in the Klaeber edition; to Julian of Norwich’s *Book of Showings* by chapter numbers in the longer version; to Snorri’s *Edda* by the 1848 chapter numbers; to the Old Norse sagas (except for *Völsunga saga*) by page numbers in the *Íslensk Fornrit* editions, including the verses; to *Völsunga saga* by page

the rival, a warrior tries to grasp the other's organs of speech, and so take hold of the interior power. Language is reality's "body, ... flesh, and blood" (Foucault 1977:57), and is the target of aggressivity, which "gnaws away," kills, mutilates, and "castrates" (Lacan 1977:10). Fear and competition run through all sound, language, and action from the earliest stages of childhood, when the image "of the fragmented body" causes the thoughts and speech about "mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body" that children constantly display (11). "Power in this context can be defined as the capacity to wound[. It] always includes violence, however psychic or internalized" (Bloom 1982:49). Thus *Beowulf* puts great emphasis on dismemberment, and on the eating of body parts (Zumthor 1990:219). The Grendel race eats the bodies of people who seem to have a greater ability with language than its own kind. Hondscioh's death (*Beowulf* 740-45a) is a diagram of the relationship between the body and the other, and, with this "sense of 'otherness'," *Beowulf* is able to perceive the "intimacy" of his "own embodiment" (Zaner 1981:52-53), so that he can act. The heroes of *The Kalevala* obtain the rudiments of poetry from a giant's body: "from the mouth of Antero Vipunen, from the belly of the man richly stocked" (17.13-14). Sigurðr kills Fáfnir, cuts out the dragon's heart, eats part of it, and so gains understanding of the language of nature in *Vǫlsunga saga* (65-66; *Fled Bricrend* 106-7). Högni's heart is also cut out (102). Atli eats the hearts of his sons, after Guðrún slits their throats (104). The hero of *Beowulf* declares that, when he killed Dæghrefn, he "heortan wylmas, / banhus gebræc" (2507b-8a) "broke the bone-house, the heart's wellings." He causes the hearts of two rulers to overflow in similar wellings: Hrothgar "breostwylm forberan ne mehte" (1877) "could not restrain the breast-welling;" Hygelac says "Ic ðæs modceare / sorhwylmum seað" (1992b-93a) "I have brooded over this / with anxious mind and sorrow-wellings." In a figurative sense, *Beowulf* overpowers the interiors of his two greatest patrons.

numbers in the Finch edition, including the verses; to Saxo's *History of the Danes* by page numbers in the Olrik and Ræder edition; to *The Táin* and to other works concerning Cúchulainn (except for *Fled Bricrend*) by page numbers in the Kinsella translation, including the verses; to *Fled Bricrend* by page numbers in the Henderson edition and translation; to *The Kalevala* by poem numbers, then line numbers, in the Magoun translation. All uncredited translations are my own.

Andreas describes acts of cannibalism (158b-60):

wæs him need micel
 þæt hie tobrugdon blodigum ceaf lum
 fira flæscho man him to foddorþege.

The need in [the Mermedonians] was great to rend the corpses of men into pieces with bloody jaws for their fodder.

This diet takes on a new meaning when it might include the bodies of two apostles who bear the word of God inside them. Mary also carries the Word inside her when she carries Jesus in her womb (Jager 1991:284). Óðinn is more than just a meal for Fenrir when the chief god has power over runes and language (Snorri 51). In *Riddle 47* the bookworm *word fræt* (1), “ate words,” as if they were meat, and the Christian eucharist connects word, body, and food (Zumthor 1990:8; Revelation 10:10).⁴

Evidence suggests that oral people situate the soul in the breast (Jager 1990:850; Higley 1992:284), and associate it with life as physical life: breath, body parts, and blood, which move inside the chest cavity. Both the Finnish and the Old English traditions mention a “wordhoard” or physical organ of speech inside the person: “Shall I open my chest of words, unlock my song box” (*Kal* 1.87-88; cf. *Beo* 259b). Even writing participates in the physicality of northern culture. Brynhildr’s long poem in *Völsunga saga* describes runes inscribed upon the body, the back of the hand, and on the body parts of animals (37-38). The act of making a text cuts the skin and reveals the interior flesh. Language’s relationship with the body appears again in Theodoric’s refusal to allow the Goths an education in the Latin language, because fear of the strap in school might lead to fear of the sword in battle (Wormald 1977:98). But above all, oral cultures reveal physical aggression in their preoccupation with the voice.

Paul Zumthor redirects discussion of the voice towards its physical attributes (1984:76-77):

the tension out of which the oral poem is formed in effect takes shape between the spoken word and the human voice, and proceeds from a quasi contradiction between their respective finalities: between the finite properties of the discourse structures and the infiniteness of memory; between the abstract nature of language and the spatial world of the body.

⁴ Sarah Higley gives an excellent inventory of these kinds of connections, particularly in Norse and Welsh metaphors of poetic acquisition and their Indo-European analogues (1992:278-303).

Since one's voice can increase in volume, even more impressively with practice (and with a large physique), "voiced discourse given aloud has its roots more clearly in the human body" (69), and has more self-knowledge in terms of its "physical power" (69; 1990:8, 201). Oral tradition always bears a human face and always has a human body. Any knowledge within this tradition has physicality because the memory cannot recall information without the voice that speaks it, and "knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost" (Ong 1982:24). Since oral methods of preserving knowledge "tend to be agonistic in operation" (1981:123), the production of heroic biography is crucial, even desperate. Oral compositions are fame-driven, physical, and agonistic.

Early biography reflects and supports existing forms of social organization, such as kinship; so, oral people think of human lives and of the stories of these lives as aggregates of legendary and nearly legendary events, places, and persons. All of these exist only as an other, a body of memories within a person's mind (Ong 1982:37-39). The past is therefore like a part of the body, an interior totem, "a language . . . that appropriates and consumes all other languages" (Foucault 1977:66), and the active hero competes with and tries to surpass the aggregative power of history by absorbing his rivals and all of their prior accomplishments into his own good name. This absorption relates to the act of speaking, because a hero engulfs words when he absorbs another person's reputation (Higley 1992:287).

The mouth is the focus of physicality and violence in the face. Objects enter the mouth, are broken down, and lose their original form. While faces indicate the differences between one human and another, mouths indicate an interior that one cannot see, but knows is similar to one's own: chewing reduces a variety of objects into a kind of sameness. Since the interior is unseen, it is dangerous. Verse 9 of Psalm 5 describes the singer's enemies: "their inward part is very wickedness." When it vomits, the mouth again presents physicality and violence (Zumthor 1990:8; Higley 1992:283), and this organ has associations besides food: "gluttony," "lips sucking at the breast, . . . nourishment, . . . love, . . . a sexual organ" (Zumthor 1990:8), the only sexual organ that can be either active or passive. Teeth have a sense of touch, but a violent function, although the soft lips hide the potential offense of the mouth's interior most of the time. The mouth is "ambiguous" (8; *Grettis saga* 52-53, verse 14), and the open mouth of a declaiming oral poet emphasizes its physical traits of interiority and violence.

Speech includes “spatiality of the body” (Zumthor 1990:41) beyond the mouth, such as parts of the neck. These organs are also associated with violence. The term “Adam’s apple” implies that the larynx belongs or belonged to someone else (Ps 12.4): the other, the interior figure, the past, a forebear from ancient times. This speaking organ is an object, an inheritance. Its proverbial title implies that it can kill, because “Adam’s apple” makes the voicebox into a version of the apple in the Genesis story. The apple represents knowledge of good and evil, but also death, the word (Ambrose, *de paradiso* xv.74; Jager 1991:281, 284), and stolen speech. One psalm describes the throat of an enemy as “an open sepulchre” (5.9; Zumthor 1990:8), an image of death, while another addresses God: “Thou hast also given me the necks of mine enemies” (18.40). Surely any society that sanctions capital punishment through hanging someone by the throat (often also a form of torture and/or ritual [Swenson 1991:128]) perceives some danger from the larynx, and many other forms of execution involve the neck. Hanging attacks the voicebox directly and silences the victim by cutting off breath.⁵

Speaking relies on the body’s breathing apparatus. Eric Jager notices that the word *breost* in Old English often means “organ of speech”; poets connect it with “poetry or song” (1991:279, 280; 1990:847-48; *Beo* 2550-51; *Andreas* 1278-80), as well as with motherhood and eroticism (284). In orality, words and thoughts are “necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven” (Ong 1982:32), because breath is physical power (*VgS* 61; Ps 18.8-15; 29.4-9). A person thinks that the force of a breath, like speech, contains something of the breather: one can betray one’s presence, level of consciousness, level of health (Job 17.1), and state of emotion with breath. This recognition that breath is life (Job 7.7), this recognition of the life of the other, is unsettling because one interprets it in a hostile way: “the fecundity of the *other* breath . . . is unpower” (Derrida 1978:176). Others “breathe out cruelty” (Ps 27.12). Cúchulainn fights “over the breaths of men-folk” (*Fl Bric* 26-27, 108-9).

The oral poet thinks of speech as “breath” (Derrida 1978:176), a “possession” that others can steal—and they take it ceaselessly (175). One can even steal from one’s own speech and compositions (177-78), as the metonymic habits of Old English imply: “since [speech] is stolen from

⁵ Crucifixion also affects powers of speech by distending and weakening the chest cavity.

language it is, thus, stolen from itself" (178).⁶ "Wordhoard," then, "signifies not only the repertoire of language but the power of language symbolic of the speaker's power" (Irvine 1991:192).

As literacy and Christianity gain acceptance, sensitivity to breath and to the interior of the body change. The speaking parts of chest and thorax, an interior of wet, dark, soft, moving parts, are replaced with a more abstract soul. Augustine defines the body quite clearly, but in order to banish it—in order to define the soul (*De Civitate Dei* XXII.xxiv). He and others try to silence the interior, and help to redefine the body as a temple (1 Cor 6.19), a cold object of restricted access, usually made of stone. Ong calls oral narrative less interior than that of the novel (1982:44); perhaps he means that oral societies, unlike Augustine, do not fully abstract the interior. "By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld," Ong continues, "orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle" (*idem*) that involves the body.

Oral traditions show this struggle in their poetry, and works that have some claims for oral origins are candid about the power and violence of oral art (Higley 1992:278-303). The biblical God, for instance, especially in the Old Testament, is remarkably oral: prophets do not see Him but hear Him (Deut 4.12). He demands animal carcasses as sacrifices; breathes life into the lifeless body, or breathes torture upon it in the form of fire (Isai 30.33). He destroys enemies (30.30-31), gives forth "hail stones" (Ps 18.13), shakes "the earth" (Heb 12.26), and silences all else (Zec 2.13) with His "still small voice" (1 Kings 19.12; Ps 29.4-9). In the New Testament, God's law speaks "that every mouth may be stopped" (Rom 3.19).

In oral works, a person's reputation will contain both art and battle because the only way to surpass someone else is to fill the present instant with either poetry or action, which seem to have similar powers and seem to issue from the same place. In *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, the hero is the most vociferous proponent of his own achievements in combat, verse, and reputation. Each Ulster warrior in *The Táin* has his day "to take care of every man who came that way with poetry, and to fight any others" (86). This description implies that one may defeat someone with poetry's power alone; however, most heroic poems mix battle- and verse-skill together. Egill the veteran fighter has many oral skills: "power over runes, power in cursing, ... power in healing" (Fell 1975:xv), and power in judging, all of which give this hero social and bardic status and help him to excel in any demanding situation.

⁶ For an interesting study of metonymy in *Beowulf*, see Overing 1990:10-17. See also Foley 1991:7. Parks calls metonymy the "dialogue of memories" (1991:57).

In Egill's fight with Ljótr, poetic prowess seems to be the same as fighting prowess. Ljótr can expect no mercy from *skaldi* (*EgS* 203, verse 38), "the poet" (as Egill often calls himself in the course of this duel [202-6]) either in battle, or in the record of history that begins with Egill's verse descriptions of his foe. Whereas Ljótr boasts, bellows, and bites his shield (202-3), Egill decorates their encounter with the poetry of a virtuoso. The battle not only kills Ljótr, but also *kyrrum* (204, verse 39) "quiets" him. The verbal dimension of a battle can be as damaging to one's reputation (and to one's person) as the physical.

Egill next contends with Atli. This antagonist anticipates loss when he responds to the hero's boast with "kann ek engu svara" (207), "I cannot reply." Egill "segir, at eigi vill hann eiða hans taka fyrir fé sitt" (208), "said that he did not want to take [Atli's] oaths instead of [Atli's] money," and so dismisses the value of his rival's words. Eventually Atli admits to verbal defeat: "þú mælir þat, er ek ætta at mæla" (208), "you said what I ought to say." Sometimes, the mere appearance of Egill and his father is enough to render the words of others ineffective (Fell 1975:xv). A hero's mouth, body, and energy work to silence any competitor.

Characters in heroic compositions often treat battle and verbal attack as much the same thing, and describe these two in the same terms. In *Beowulf*, people rarely speak without engaging in conflict with someone else, with the past, or with the future. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Kári speaks (albeit ironically) of men that "með orðum eru vegnir" (415), "are slain with words," and *Vainglory* describes voices as weapons in a kind of battle (16-23a):

wordum wrixlað, witan fundiaþ
 hwylc æscstede inne in ræcede
 mid werum wunige.
 . . . cwide scralletaþ
 missenlice. Swa beoþ modsefan
 dalum gedæled, sindon dryhtguman
 ungelice.

[They] exchange words, strive to know which battlefield may dwell with men in the hall. ... voices rise up in competition with one another, just as temperments are given out: men are unlike one another.

On this battlefield (here in the meadhall, where "vainglory" holds sway), powers of battle and language are mixed.

To pinpoint one particular image of verbal aggression, Unferth's "wit" pierces like a sword in *Beowulf* (589b; *Precepts* 84), and in the Irish

story *Aided Oenfir Aife* from *The Yellow Book of Lecan*, Cúchulainn uses an image of spears to describe the assault of his language upon an opponent (*Táin* 41,44):

I tuned my voice:
 from little jaws
 a straight shot sped
 with my little spears
 flung from afar.

The image is similar to those in Psalm 64 (3), Isaiah (49.2), and Revelation (2.16). *Vainglory* describes a proud man's speeches as *hygegar* (34b; *Kal* 3.267-68; Jager 1990:851), "thought-spears."⁷

In these works, and in others that seem to be of oral provenance, attacks often occur from the mouth. Job says of his enemies: "They have gaped upon me with their mouth" (Job 16.10; Ps 22.13). Some of these assaults suggest cannibalism: "my foes came upon me to eat up my flesh" (Ps 27.2; Job 16.9; Zumthor 1990:8). At one point in *Völsunga saga*, destiny seems to take the form of a huge bear in a prophetic dream. The animal threatens to eat all of the principal characters: "hafði oss öll senn sér í munnni svá at ekki máttum vér" (67; *Fl Bric* 106-107), "it had us all in his mouth so that we might do nothing." Some residue of this kind of cannibalistic assault remains in the medieval idea of hell-mouth, in the heart-directed violence (sometimes oral) of love-literature, and in the many accounts of saints' lives where the martyr is tortured in a fashion that suggests the preparation of a meal: skinning, boiling, roasting on a gridiron.

In *The Kalevala*, the recited words of a poet assault a person physically. Väinämöinen's reputation for singing grows so great (3.31-34) that Joukahainen becomes envious, and vows (3.57-66):

I will sing down my rival singers, enchant my enchanters.
 I will sing the best singer into the worst singer,
 sing shoes of stone onto his feet, wooden pants onto his hips,
 a stone weight onto his chest, a chunk of rock onto his shoulders,
 stone mittens onto his hands, onto his head a high-peaked hat of rock.

Väinämöinen becomes angry and his song changes his rival's possessions and clothing into dead and/or rigid aspects of nature; he imprisons Joukahainen in the landscape. Väinämöinen sings (3.325-30):

⁷ See also *Finnsburg Fragment* (6b-7a); *Andreas* (1132b-34); *Táin* (107).

the soft woolen belt from his waist into stars throughout the heavens.
 He bewitched Joukahainen himself, sang him into a fen up to the loins,
 into a grassy meadow up to the groin, into a heath up to the armpits.

As part of the older tradition, Väinämöinen uses his Orphic power to try to engulf the younger poet.

A similar conquest takes place in the career of Lemminkäinen, who sings all other poets into the ground, and drives them off into infertile territories, “to treeless clearings, fallow fields, / to fishless ponds” (12.459-61). His song demonstrates control over nature in contrast to the sterility of his adversaries: he destroys their oral and social powers, increases their alienation, and shrivels their reputations. The wastelands have no other people in them, so these exiles have no opportunities to demonstrate their martial abilities and further their fame.

The image of a sterile landscape hints at a connection between oral poetry and fecundity. Higley proposes that “producing poetry is a kind of ‘birth,’ . . . a means by which a male poet can partake in the female act of creation” (1992:287); however, the actions of men in *The Kalevala* are not “passive” (*idem*), but active: Väinämöinen descends into the belly of a giant to steal poetry (17.13-14). As the figurative childbirth of a violent hero, an oral performance absorbs the creative power of women. Generally, oral cultures attribute extreme power to oral utterances: “in early Irish tradition, a satire could cause a king to waste away . . . it could cause human deformities; it could kill animals; and it could make the land sterile” (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:39). In Saxo’s *History*, Starcatherus’s severed head snaps at the ground as if he were still reciting his deeds (229). The power of the mouth goes beyond nature.

Augustine’s attitude towards the physicality of the voice in *De magistro* is like the ancient Greeks’ toward “barbarians.” He treats orality superficially, as if it were a superstition that literate Christianity would get rid of; yet Augustine cannot hide his nervousness about the oral tradition. In one of his definitions of signs, he recalls a popular joke in order to clarify his distinction between nouns and the objects that the nouns denote (viii.23):

Aug. Vellem scire, quomodo illi resisteres, de quo iocantes solemus audire, quod ex eius ore, cum quo disputabat, leonem processisse concluderit. Cum enim quaesisset, utrum ea, quae loqueremur, nostro ore procederent, atque ille non potuisset negare, quod facile fuit, egit cum homine, ut in loquendo leonem nominaret. Hoc ubi factum est, ridicule insultare coepit et premere, ut, quoniam quicquid loquimur ore nostro exire

confessus erat et leonem se locutum esse nequibat abnuere, homo non malus tam immanem bestiam vomuisse videretur.

Adeodatus. Minime vero erat arduum scurrae huic resistere

Aug. Let's see how you would prove the man wrong who claimed that a lion emerged from the mouth of the man he was debating with, as we frequently hear in the form of a joke. For, when he was asked if the things that we say proceed from our mouths, this man could not say no. It was easy for this man [the prankster] to make the other mention a lion in the course of his speech. When this occurred, he began to mock him and to drive home the idea that, since he had admitted that whatever we say comes out of our mouth, and he did not deny that he had said "lion," he had unleashed from his mouth such a monstrous beast, though he seemed to be not a bad man.

Ad. It would not be at all hard to refute this clown, truly

This jester, albeit facetiously, treats the ignorant man's replies as an attack by a monstrous beast, whose violence represents the terrible oral powers that lurk in the mouth. Augustine feels a threat from these powers. Stephen Nichols observes that the saint associates the voice with the sexuality and sensuality of the body, which are forces to be silenced (1991:146, 148-52; Augustine *DCD* XXII.xxiv).⁸

Many characters in heroic works attack the speech-organs of rivals. These assaults contribute to a hero's contest for fame, because such organs do as much to make a reputation as one's deeds. Although the nickname *ormstunga* (*Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu* 59; *Fl Bric* 1-2; Rom 3.13), "snake-tongue," insults an enemy's verse, it has the physical target of the victim's appropriate body parts (just as sexual insults often do). However, most assaults upon poetic power are physical: a warrior slices open the enemy body, takes out the speech-maker (or perhaps the container of aggregate memory), and swallows it. These events occur explicitly in *Völsunga saga* (33) when Sigurðr tastes part of Fáfnir's heart and understands the language of birds; they occur implicitly when anyone chooses the mouth, chest, or throat as a target.

In *Grettis saga*, the young hero quarrels with his relative Auðunn after a ball game, and promises revenge after the older boy bests him at wrestling (44). As men, the two resume their fight. The poet Barði separates them, and Grettir warns him in a verse (97-98, verse 26):

⁸ However, Augustine acknowledges the power, physicality, and violence of the mouth when he imagines the saints as the "teeth of the church" (*De doctrina christiana* II.vi.7).

Eigi veitk, nema útan
 Jalfaðr at þér sjölfum
 kverkr fyr kapp ok orku,
 kvelling es þat, svelli;
 svá bannaði sinnir
 seim-Gauts, þás vask heima,
 ungum endr fyr lǫngu
 ákall þinul fjalla.

I do not know but that [Auðunn] will attack your throat and cause it to swell, to reward your stubbornness. That would be an injury. In that way, he repulsed me a long time ago when I was a youngster at home.

By depicting such an assault, and suggesting that Auðunn will go at another poet in the same way, Grettir associates an attack on the larynx with an attack on one's power to speak and one's prowess in verse.

Grettir demonstrates his own power to stop speech in his encounter with a berserker who chews on his shield in a display of oral aggression. The hero perceives power in his rival's "toptum / tanngarðs" (137, verse 29), "tooth-fortress," a place where personified speech lives in the man's interior. By splitting the berserker's jaw with a kick (136-37), Grettir prevents him from being able to boast as the hero can: "þess verðr þo getit, sem gǫrt er" (137), "what happened will be talked about." Similarly, God's word may prosper more thoroughly once He has amputated the speech-organs of His enemies (Ps 12.3), and in *The Kalevala* Lemminkäinen also assails his adversaries in their speaking parts: "he pushed stones straight into their mouths" (12.453). Grettir's kick may recall the divine revenge after Óðinn meets his death in Fenrir's mouth and stomach. The wolf dies when Viþar tears apart its mouth (Snorri 51). The gods' battle represents the verbal contest at its most mythological and resonant.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the ear receives the attack as well as the mouth. Þórarinn strikes Þorbjörn with his sword and later describes the result (39, verse 4):

blóð fell, en vas váði
 vígtjalds nár skaldi,
 þá vas dæmisalr dóma
 dreyrafullr, of eyru.

Then blood flowed down over the ears and the speech-hall [mouth] filled with blood. The sword was near the poet.

The poem's imagery suggests that Þorbjörn lacks the spittle necessary to lubricate his mouth and praise himself. Þórarinn causes some fluid to appear, and his foe tastes death. The word *dæmisalr* personifies speech and places it in the mouth like an interior man; but this use of "speech-hall" for "mouth" is also a corrosive irony. Þorbjörn is rendered silent. Like Grettir, the victor of this contest contrasts his powerful verses with the weakness of an enemy (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 44, verse 10; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 443).

Þórarinn's reference to liquids recalls the origins of poetry in the spittle of the gods and giants. The Vanir and Æsir spit into a vat as a ritual of truce: their aggression is vented through oral action. The gods form this spittle into the wisest man on earth, but two dwarves kill him and take possession of his blood, which they mix with honey in order to make the mead of poetry. This legend associates verse with many of the physical aspects of orality, including food, saliva, cannibalism, and rending of the body. Once a giant hides the mead inside a mountain, poetry also takes on the interiority of an internal organ (Snorri 57-58).

The most vivid examples of competitive orality are assaults from speech-organs upon other speech-organs: "I will sing his shoulders apart, will talk his chin apart, / his shirt collar in two, his breastbone to pieces" (*Kal* 26.297-300). Egill is the most virulent perpetrator of attacks upon speaking parts. At the end of his fight with Atli, Egill "greyfðisk at niðr ok beit í sundr í honum barkann; lét Atli þar líf sitt" (*EgS* 210), "bent down and bit his windpipe asunder; then Atli died." The hero acts like an animal, almost like a cannibal, to silence and kill his rival, and exhibits "the oral hostility underlying internecine slaughter among hall-thanes" (Hill 1977:18).

Egill's next act suggests that his mode of attack has associations with ancient religious beliefs. He kills a sacrificial bull by grabbing its *granarnar*, "jaw," and twisting. He then says (*EgS* 210, verse 42):

Beitat nú, sás brugðum,
blár Dragvandill randir,
af þvít eggjar deyfði
Atli framm enn skammi;
neyttak afls við ýti
ormálgastan hjörva;
jaxlbróður létk eyða,
ek bar af sauði, nauðum.

The sword, blue Dragvandill, although I drew it, did not dig into the shield, because Atli the short dulled its blades. I used strength against the snake-

tongued sword-waver. I needed to let my teeth work destruction. I performed the sacrifice.

With a “snake-tongued” foe, Egill’s actions against Atli’s speech-organs make sense as a climax to the verbal battle that precedes the duel. The hero eliminates the oral and poetic competition. A throat wound removes the possibility of a rival telling a conflicting version of the outcome or events of a battle, and so strikes a blow for one’s own fame.

Christine Fell finds the “strength and madness” of Egill’s method of killing Atli to be “normally associated with shape-changers” (1975:xv). In *Völsunga saga* two assaults similar to Egill’s take place while humans are in the shapes of animals. In one instance, Sigmundur and his companion put on magic wolf-skins. When Sinfjötli fails to live up to an agreement, the hero “hleypr at honum svá hart at hann stakar við ok fellr. Sigmundur bítr í barkann framan” (11), “rushed at him so fiercely that [Sinfjötli] stumbled and fell. Sigmundur bit into his windpipe.” The hero regrets his actions, watches a weasel heal a throat-wound with a herb, heals Sinfjötli with the same herb, curses the skins, and eventually burns them (11-12). His back-pedaling suggests that much guilt accompanies this kind of assault. The writer implies that Sigmundur acts so violently only because his human nature (his interior man) is changed into an alien, animalistic presence (11), so changed that the hero feels he must rip this alien figure out of his rival’s/alter ego’s interior.

The other oral assault in this saga demonstrates that oral competition has links with sexual competition.⁹ Sigmundur and his brothers are imprisoned in stocks while a witch in she-wolf form feasts on all of them save the hero. Witches represent a sexual power that threatens male dominance.¹⁰ Sigmundur prepares himself for the wolf’s next visit (8):

⁹ Sexual competition is probably implicit in battle-scenes; Þórarinn’s accusation in *Eyrbyggja saga* that his rival lacks fluid certainly implies a sexual competition.

¹⁰ Female monsters of all sorts, including witches, carry an oral threat. In one of Grettir’s poems, a *harðmynn*, “hard-mouthed” troll-woman, looms over an opponent (*GrS* 47, verse 11). *Beowulf* implies that Grendel’s mother eats men. In addition, the she-wolf in *Völsunga saga* might connect with the giant wolf, a figure of chaos, which swallows the divine control over runes and language when it engulfs Óðinn at the end of time (Snorri 51).

Equally, men represent a sexual/oral threat to female narrators. In Julian of Norwich’s last revelation, “the fende sett hym in my throte, puttyng forth a vysage fulle nere my face lyke a yonge man, and it was longe and wonder leen” (Chapter 67). This devil appears in Julian’s “slepe,” like a sexual fantasy, and unlike any of her other visions. He is bestial and his mouth is particularly threatening: he “shewde me whyt teth and so

Um nóttina eptir þá kemr sú in sama ylgr at vanda sínum ok ætlaði at bíta hann til bana sem bræðr hans. En nú dregr hon veðrit af honum, þar sem hunangit var á riðit, ok sleikir andlit hans allt með tungu sér ok réttir síðan tunguna í munn honum. Hann lætr sér verða óbilt ok beit í tunguna ylginni. Hon bregðr við fast ok hnykkir at sér hart ok rak fœtrna í stokkinn svá at hann klofnaði allr í sundr, en hann helt svá fast at tungan gekk ór ylginni upp ór tungurótunum, ok fekk af því bana.

A later night the wolf came in the same fashion, and thought to bite him to death, just as she had done to his brothers. When she smelled the honey that had been daubed on him, she licked his entire face with her tongue, and then pushed her tongue into his mouth. He screwed up his courage and bit into the wolf's tongue. She reacted suddenly and pressed backwards, bracing herself with her paws against the stocks, so that they burst into pieces; yet he held so strongly onto the tongue that it was torn out by the roots, and that was her death.

Like Grendel, the wolf embodies most of the human fears concerning the other: darkness, magic, animalistic humanity, inevitability of return, anticipated death, and feeding on human flesh. She lacks (for the moment) the normal human means of identification and communication (such as human language). Sigmundr is immobile and his plan seems to be a last resort. The idea of her penetrating his interior, with its suggestion of his sexual passivity, probably adds to Sigmundr's uneasiness. He has to push himself into the act of biting her tongue. As soon as he grips it, he steals her power: she destroys the stocks, but, despite teeth and claws, can do no damage (apparently) to the hero's body. This power seems to be sexual. Her tongue is phallic and Sigmundr "castrates" his monstrous rival—"monstrous" (according to early medieval ideology) because she represents active feminine sexuality.

The connection between oral and sexual dominance is even more explicit in Snorri's *Edda*. In order to obtain the mead of poetry from the interior of a mountain, Óðinn must submit to the sexual desire of a giantess: "la hia henni iii. nætr, ok þa lofaði hon honum at drecka af miðinum iii. drycki" (58), "[Óðinn] lay with her three nights, and then she granted him three drinks of the mead." The phallic imagery of Óðinn's entry into the giants' lair (he changes himself into a snake and travels through a hole in the mountainside), and the correspondence between three nights of sex and three draughts of liquid secure the connection between oral poetic prowess

mekylle me thought it the more ugly . . . with hys pawes he helde me in the throte, and woude a stoppyd my breth and kyld me" (Chapter 67). This fiend perhaps represents Julian's anxiety at being silenced by the authorities of the church. At the time of her revelations she is "unlettyrde" (Chapter 2); thus the fiend attacks her oral powers.

and sexual prowess (Higley 1992:283). Since the mead was originally spittle, a vat of it is something like a mouth; Óðinn's draughts represent the sucking of poetry from one interior into another.¹¹

To deliver the mead of poetry to the Æsir, Óðinn must vomit it forth (Snorri 58). Words connect with vomit, as Zumthor (1990:8), Higley (1992:282-83), and Ong imply: spoken language involves “‘eating,’ psychologically chewing, swallowing, digesting, assimilating from within” (Ong 1977:24).¹² Vomit therefore has metaphorical associations with poetry. Egill makes such an association when he responds to a farmer's inferior hospitality. He puts his hands on his host's shoulders as if he were about to recite, and then (226)

upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun ok nasarnar ok í munninn; rann svá ofan um bringuna, en Ármóði varð við andhlaup, ok er hann fekk ǫndinni frá sér hrundit, þá gaus upp spýja.

brought up a huge vomit that flooded over Ármóðr's face, and inside his eyes and nostrils, and into his mouth; it ran down over his breast so that Ármóðr approached suffocation. And when he could draw breath again, he vomited.

The “attack” exits from the hero's mouth, affects the speech-organs of the rival, and goes into his interior. Winded and fearful of his life, the farmer is prevented from speaking, and from returning Egill's insult, until he can catch his breath. The vomit's effect is temporary, but it is the same as that of a throat or chest wound. And, despite the onlookers' reaction that Egill “væri inn verstí maðr af þessu verki” (226), “was the most dishonorable man for this deed,” the spewing-contest seems to add to Egill's reputation. He says (226, verse 45):

Títt erum verð at vátta,
vætti berk at hættak
þung til þessar gǫngu,
þinn kinnalǫ minni,

I am delighted to offer testimony for your hospitality with my cheek-ale. I give strong evidence that I went for this walk,

¹¹ A vat also suggests female genitalia. The story may imply that Óðinn, in his role as a taboo-breaker, has oral sex with the giantess.

¹² *Vǫlsunga saga* makes links between drink, speech, and poison (10, 18). In Revelation, John eats a book which makes his “belly ... bitter” (10:10).

—and connects poetic “testimony” with vomit in explicit terms.

Beowulf’s oral preoccupations come through in the poem’s connections between talking, joy, and culture (88b-90a). Speech is a civilized and civilizing act—light as opposed to darkness. The poem is a dialogue between sounds and silence, and progresses from silence to communication: “assertive nonverbal behavior in the poem functions to initiate and maintain communication between parties” (Redwine 1984:36). Grendel’s terror engenders dialogue between the Geats and the Danes.

A giant like the man-eating trolls in Old Norse legend (Kaske 1967:290; *Beo* 426a, 761a), Grendel uses his mouth to devour instead of to communicate with the human society (*Beo* 740-45a; *GrS* 47, verse 11). In contrast to the eloquent hero, Grendel approaches Heorot as “the threat of silence given form” (Near 1988:227), and presides over an alien world of soundlessness and “animal . . . instinct” (Neumann 1954:291; Redwine 1984:36; *Beo* 687-767a). Besides silence, this monster represents another oral taboo: a regression into an existence “where eating and being eaten are the sole expressions of life and of man’s efforts to dominate nature” (Neumann 1954:291). In his “oral rage” (Hill 1977:18), he threatens to eat all of the Danish community (*Beo* 731-34a); perhaps, as God’s enemy (786b), all of God’s community. Grendel paralyzes the Danes with his incomprehensibility: “Monig oft gesæt / rice to rune; ræd eahtedon” (171b-72, 130-34a), “Many a powerful man sat often in council, and searched for a plan” against Grendel, but to no effect.

This monster’s silence adds to his mystery. He becomes just a bit more human once *Beowulf*’s grip causes him to cry out (785b-88a):

wop gehyrdon,
gryreleoð galan Godes andsacan,
sigeleasne sang, sar wanigean
helle hæfton.

[The Danes] heard the lamentation, [heard] God’s enemy sing a fearful poem, a song of defeat, the captive of hell wailing in pain.

Now that Grendel has spoken, it makes sense for *Beowulf* to attack him in his speaking parts. In the mere, the hero hacks off the monster’s head (1590) and thus does something to silence the *deofla gedræg* (756a), “the noise of devils,” which Grendel embodies and seeks in death. This *sceadugenga* (703b), “walker in shadows,” becomes more and more recognizable to the Danes and to the rest of humanity throughout the course of the poem: they first perceive his voice, then his arm (833b-36), and

finally his head (1647-50). The silence of this head, and its separation from the body, prove Grendel's death. Beowulf also cuts into the neck (1566a) of Grendel's mother.

Later in the poem, the dragon responds to Beowulf's war-cry (2551b-52) with a kind of pseudo-speech that has previously broadcast the monster's evil reputation throughout the land (2306b-11), and now threatens to consume the hero (2582, 2595). Beowulf tries to attack the monster's head (2679b), a successful approach with previous adversaries; but his sword breaks (2680b), and he receives a wound in his organs of speech. Jager notices that the chest, a center of speech, figures prominently in this fight (1990:849-50). But the dragon (like Egill), in seeking to kill and silence a challenger, attacks Beowulf in the neck (2691b-93):

heals ealne ymbefeng
biteran banum; he geblodegod wearð
sawuldriore, swat yðum weoll.

the terrible fangs grasped him about the neck; he became drenched in
life's-blood; the blood welled out in waves.

Wiglaf manages to pinpoint the vulnerable speaking parts of the dragon more accurately, and strikes it *nioðor hwene* (2699b), "further down," so that now "ðæt fyr ongon / sweðrian" (2699b-2702a) "the fire began to abate." Beowulf seems to take his next target from Wiglaf's example (2705), slashes the dragon in the belly, and it dies.

In the same pattern as the fight, the dragon's poison moves from Beowulf's throat to his lower speaking parts (2711b-15a):

Ða sio wund ongon,
þe him se eorðdraca ær geworhte,
swelan ond swellan; he þæt sona onfand,
þæt him on breostum bealonið(e) weoll
attor on innan.

Then the wound, which the earth-dragon had given him before, began to
seethe and swell; he soon realized that poison, harmful currents, welled
inside him at his breast.

The venom seeks out Beowulf's "soul's treasury," lodged in his breast like the "wordhoard" (2419b-24; Jager 1990:851), but his voice fights back. The hero "ofer benne spræc, / wunde wælbleate" (2724b-25a), "spoke over the wound, the deadly injury." As Joseph Harris points out, speaking

despite one's wounds is part of a tradition in the "death-song" genre, where the dying hero often mentions his or her physical "condition" (1992:7, 15).

Wiglaf throws water on his king, which, besides the waking effect, would cool the burns, dilute the poison, and allow Beowulf to find the fluid to speak more easily, if water were to end up in his mouth. And the result of the water is words, described in aggressive terms: "oð þæt wordes ord / breosthord þurhbræc" (2791b-92a), "until the point of the speech broke through the container of the breast." The monster's poison tries to imprison the words of Beowulf's story inside their physical place of origin, but this moving testimony, the legacy of a great hero's achievements (2733-43), fights through like the "thought-spears" of *Vainglory* before Beowulf lapses into permanent silence.

Another Old English poem, *Solomon and Saturn*, chastises the devil for his "illegitimate speech," "vicious counter-language" (Hermann 1989:36), and "letters of death" (O'Keefe 1990:56, 57; *S & S* 161-63a). The personified letters G, S, and T of the manuscript *pater noster* in *Solomon and Saturn* make assaults like Grettir's on the demon's speech-organs, and the manuscript page becomes a battlefield (O'Keefe 1990:57; Hermann 1989:36). T spears the devil's tongue (*S & S* 94b), G *stilleð* him (133b), and S also *gestilled* him when it (113b-15a; cf. Ps 3.7)

læteð foreweard hleor
on strangne stan, stregdað toðas
geond helle heap.

hurled his face against a hard stone, scattered his teeth through hell.

The "self-referential and self-canceling" (Hermann 1989:36) written letter "silences" (O'Keefe 1990:57) and "censors" (Hermann 1989:36) the demon in order to win one battle in the war between orality and literacy: "the central tension of *Solomon and Saturn I* lies in the opposition of speaking and writing both as modes of discourse and as means to power" (O'Keefe 1990:70). The conflict between orality and literacy is no mere abstraction, then, but reflects the physical battles of oral heroes.

Solomon and Saturn is a more didactic poem than *Beowulf*, with a Christian philosophy at its center. This philosophy gradually alters orality and oral biographies. Most obviously, Christianity tells the story of a deity vastly different from any pagan god: an Other who is incontestable, abstract, gazeless, often unrecognized, and comfortably distant, being spiritual. He installs Himself as "god of poetry," "supplant[s]" any past gods (Frank 1978:108), and rules in "immateriality and immortality"

(Bridges 1979:369). Whereas oral heroes and poets try to outdo one another, the Savior assimilates the whole variety of experiences (and all people of the past, including characters from all oral and literate compositions) into His career—not by surpassing them, but by redeeming humanity for them. Christ changes competition because He becomes a new (unreachable) ideal: “the sublimation of all aggression” (Ong 1981:182). His non-aggressive competition forms the last stage of heroic oral competition.

Only Jesus’ story has the power to deface all biographies. Christian history negates the hero’s search for immortality because this subversive narrative creates a new past that is impossible to transcend. The idea of competing with God’s life-story is ludicrous. He alone is divine, conquers death physically, and thus wins the oral hero’s race to possess the most ancient and surpassing history, genealogy, or legendary background. God can have no precursor (Derrida 1978:179). Nor can one compete with Him as a narrator. The written tradition asserts the authority of God’s words, and reveals Him as the ultimate narrator of human history (John 1:1). The aggregate memory becomes God and loses individuality, so competition must change its focus.

Biographies begin to maintain the life of Christ as their subtext. They become signs. The heroes of saints’ lives, for example, are “de-individualiz[ed]” (Huisman 1978:136) because their lives have imitation for the sake of heaven, rather than individualization for the sake of fame, as their goal. “The poets actually conflate the saints with Christ” (Bjork 1985:128) and martyrs live His life and die His death—not their own (Bridges 1979:377). Therefore, any attempt to absorb a saint’s life is futile because this life does not really exist. The agonistic quality of biography is subsumed into mass prayer and preparation for salvation.

Christianity also alters oral competition by forcing the speaking totem inside of oral humanity to fall silent. Jesus becomes the new ideal hero, and He contradicts the idea of an interior totem because splits and conflicts within the self are irrelevant to Him. The deity is a perfectly united soul. Humans should strive for similar unity (Augustine, *De trin* X.ix.12).¹³ The

¹³ For splits in the human soul, see Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* (XIV.v) and Boethius’s *Consolatio* (III. m. ix.15-17; IV.ii.5; V.iv.28-29). According to Malcolm R. Godden, *Beowulf* separates the *sawol* which can go to heaven from the *mod* which “seems to convey ... an inner passion or wilfulness” (1985:287, 289). Other scholars suggest further distinctions within the Anglo-Saxon soul (Moffat 1990:18-19; Higley 1988:28-29). See Allen J. Frantzen (1986:56) for King Alfred’s version of the soul’s relationship with God.

Savior further discourages the speaking self through quietness. In the gospels, Jesus wields considerable oral strength, but, in contrast to the loudness of oral combat, His “quietness” also “bespeaks power” (Ong 1981:179). At the trials before Christ’s crucifixion, His non-answers to the questions of the priests and of Pilate express the might of God’s new kingdom that exists beyond the scope of human language (Matt 26.63; 27.14). At His death, Jesus “let[s] silence interrupt his voice” (Derrida 1978:67). This silence is part of His triumph, part of the way in which He transcends human nature.

God also silences the interior self by invading the individual with His quietness. Augustine suggests that a person turn to his/her *homo interior* in order to come to a conception of self. In the privacy of this interior (*clausis cubiculis* [*De magis* i.2]), the proper activity is prayer, and

non opus est locutione, cum oramus, id est sonantibus verbis, nisi forte, sicut sacerdotes faciunt, significandae mentis suae causa.

when we pray there is no benefit in speaking, that is, in sounding the words; except, perhaps, to express the thoughts of one’s mind as priests do.

Augustine turns the interior speaker, the totem of speech that oral competitors try to grasp, into something that communicates silently. According to Nichols, Augustine feels that “performance as a step toward spiritual knowledge can only begin when the *vox corporis* (voice of the body) falls silent” (1991:147; Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.xi).¹⁴ Once this totem ceases to speak and its threat becomes less open, competition can become less physical, less violent (Hermann 1989:40), and less oral.

Jesus not only silences the totem, He replaces it. In Augustine’s thought, the interior figure becomes God—*in interiore homine habitare Christum* (*De magis* i.2; Eph 3.17). This invasion of the self occurs in spiritual terms for Augustine, but other writers describe it as a physical act. Raymond of Capua suggests that God’s spirit may enter the human interior in a violent fashion that recalls the sex act, the childish interest in dismemberment, and the oral heroic act of ripping out a rival’s interior organs of speech. Christ appears to Saint Catherine of Siena while she prays, opens her side and takes away her heart, replacing it a few days later with one that is red and shining. He informs her that He has given her the heart she prayed for: His. A scar remains on her skin to testify to the

¹⁴ Nichols interprets this voice as “passions” (150), not as an interior figure.

miracle and to the physical nature of these happenings (Raymond of Capua II.vi.178-80).

The written text, representing God, also goes into the interior. In Revelation, John eats a book from the outstretched hand of an angel, “and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter” (10:10). This event suggests an oral absorption of literacy. The two traditions are at a meeting point. Since the angel’s book comes from God, and is not the individual memories of an individual poet or warrior, absorbing it involves no violence to another’s body. And, although the Bible’s message is spread mainly through oral means in medieval times, the message itself exalts literacy by promoting the authority of written texts. The Bible is thus a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in that it becomes the surpassing work of the Middle Ages (Nichols 1991:151-52; *Conf* VIII.xi, XI.xxviii.38).

God’s invasion of the self installs the “Inner Master, who is Christ, the *Logos*” as “the voice of reason” (Earl 1989:55) inside individuals. This new voice engages in ideal communication (Derrida 1978:179) at the upper “limits of all possible languages” (Foucault 1977:33), and teaches people the meaning of signs (Earl 1989:55; Hermann 1989:130). When the same God and the same word live inside a person, when the body of memory has lost its individuality, has become an exterior totem (the book), the interior contains nothing worth ripping out. One no longer needs to engulf the words, reputations, and interiors of others. Meaning and stories are more easily obtained from the exterior source. Also, any remaining vestiges of desire for the word, the flesh, and the interior are satisfied in the symbolism of the eucharist, and of the codex itself, which has words in its interior.

The reign of manuscript means that the plan to destroy the other involves erasing not swallowing. No trace of a rival biography remains once a written account is erased and replaced with a new one on the same subject, or with one on a different subject. In *Exeter Book Riddle 47* (1-5a) for example,

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
 wrætlicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
 þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
 þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
 ond þæs strangan stapol.

A moth ate words. That appeared to me to be a marvelous event, when I learned of that wonderful happening, that the caterpillar, a thief in darkness, consumed the poem, the secure-in-glory speech, of some man, and [consumed] the foundation of that strong thing.

The bookmoth represents two kinds of destruction. It eats words as an oral competitor does (Russom 1977:131), but it also destroys songs by eating the foundation of the text. At the conjunction of oral and literate traditions, the mouth performs an erasure. This riddle, Augustine's uneasiness about the powers of speech in *De magistro*, and his wonder (and intimidation) at Ambrose's ability to read texts silently (*Conf* VI.iii.3) indicate that literacy does not take over from orality cleanly. The violence of the mouth and the strength of speech go underground while the attitude toward orality shifts. Prayer and the other legacies of literate tradition only mask the oral aggression that secretly inspires all forms of composition.

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