

Editor's Column

Over this and the next issue *Oral Tradition* will be following a double path it charted a decade and one-half ago and seeks still to follow. The present number houses a miscellany of articles on Basque, Ndebele, ancient Greek, Native American, Old English, and Old Norse traditions, and their authors employ perspectives as diverse as politics and nationalism, comparative anthropology, myth studies, lexicography and semantics, performance studies, and rhetorical theory. In this way we hope to encourage a "polylogue" that avoids the special pleading of disciplinary focus and welcomes a host of divergent viewpoints on what is after all a remarkably heterogeneous species of verbal art.

Linda White begins the colloquy with her examination of the Euskara (Basque) oral genre called *bertsolaritza*, dealing not only with its language and structure but also with the history of its recording and its identity against the political background in the context of a society's "rush to literacy." Next in line is H. C. Groenewald's study of creativity and innovation in the Zulu oral tradition of praise-poetry. Based on ten years of field research, his article shows how the practice of praising involves memorization and recitation, composition, and even the importing of poetry from other cultures. On a different note, John F. García reports on the fruits of his archival research to contend that Milman Parry's groundbreaking work on Homer's oral tradition had deeper roots in his graduate school training than has heretofore been realized, specifically that the anthropological writings and teachings of the Native Americanist A. L. Kroeber were of foundational significance for Parry's theories on ancient Greek poetry.

From anthropology Anatole Mori turns to historical reflections in ancient epic, exploring the link between the real-world Ptolemaic monarchy and the Phaeacian episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* and Apollonius' *Argonautica* against the backdrop of oral tradition. Guillemette Bolens investigates evidence of mobility, a phenomenon she sees as inherently a property of oral as opposed to written, textual expression, and finds evidence of movement and fire associated with Homer's Hephaestus and the dragon in *Beowulf*. Derek Collins reinterprets the Homeric "rhapsodes," once thought to be workaday performers of static versions of the epics, as competitive poets who used fixed texts as a basis for innovations in live performance; in doing so he makes reference to Turkish games of verbal dueling and other analogues.

Finally, we are very pleased to present the Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2001, on "Performance and Norse Poetry," by Stephen

Mitchell. Indeed, there is some special justice in Professor Mitchell's having delivered this lecture, since he serves as Curator of the Milman Parry Collection, whose contents Albert Lord initially brought before us, as well as co-editor of the second edition of Lord's *The Singer of Tales*. Here Mitchell advocates a performance-oriented approach to medieval sagas, which of course now exist only as artifacts, and shows convincingly how this approach goes well beyond traditional philology and mythology.

In the next issue of *Oral Tradition* we will honor the other half of our ongoing commitment: to devote an occasional number to a somewhat narrower focus on a single tradition or area. In this case, however, the subject will remain broad and remarkably varied, since the issue will survey the oral traditions of the minority peoples of China. Dr. Chogjin, a Mongolian specialist who spent twelve months at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at Missouri, is responsible for recruiting the thirteen authors who have written for this unprecedented collection of essays. Not a few of them are in fact the very first professional scholars their ethnic groups have produced, so the special issue they help to constitute promises to be a landmark publication in many ways.

Let me close by urging our readers to send us their best work, no matter what the particular tradition or approach. We are eager to bring your ideas before the interdisciplinary constituency that is the readership of *Oral Tradition*.

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