

## Editor's Column

*Oral Tradition* for 2003 presents something quite different from its usual contents. Over this and the next issue we will explore the “state of our art” across the multiple academic disciplines and hundreds of individual traditions, ancient through contemporary, that collectively constitute our field. That is, this and the next issue of *OT* will be devoted exclusively to sampling the heterogeneity of studies in oral tradition, to gaining some insight on the variety and limits of investigation and understanding as of the year 2003.

We start not just by admitting but by stipulating that “oral tradition” is in numerous practical ways anything but a unified field. Most obviously, it refers to all verbal art that comes into being and is transmitted without texts, and recent years have shown that it must also encompass myriad forms and genres that interact in many fascinating ways with texts, and now with electronic media. If “literature” names a hopelessly complex ecosystem of manifestly different species, then “oral tradition”—which dwarfs literature in amount and variety—presents an even greater ecological challenge.

Of course “oral tradition” should never have been so simplistically construed, but such has been the tyranny of print, text, and related media that verbal art outside their culturally sanctioned auspices did in fact suffer from this kind of marginalization. From one perspective this historical trajectory was entirely predictable. Cultures define themselves by defining competitive modes and ideas out of existence: just as regularly as mother-tongue learners of any given language eliminate certain sounds from their vocal repertoires even as they acquire the acoustic network to support their own particular language, so we textualists have narrowed our focus to textual works—complete with authors, situated inside a literary tradition, and available for individual and silent perusal via books stored in libraries. Ironically, the voices that made these texts possible, the non-textual verbal art that was both the precedent and the crucible for the book-bound strategies we so admire, was often labeled “primitive,” “unsophisticated,” or “simple”—or, more characteristically, simply ignored.

In the modern era, and never more than in today's world, we are coming to understand that “oral tradition” plays an enormous and necessary part in any concept of verbal art. Moreover, the stakes are high. If we fail to take sufficient account of these riches, we disenfranchise whole cultures, misconstrue the cognitive categories and social activities of others, and redefine the ancient and medieval worlds in our own necessarily graven

image. Hopefully, over the past seventeen years the pages of *Oral Tradition* have contributed to this ongoing reassessment and rebalancing, participating in helping to make us aware of some of the wonderful richness and complexity of “oral tradition” while offering both tradition-specific insights and comparative analogies that can be useful to a responsible citizen of the twenty-first century. That at least has been our goal.

Amid the hurly-burly of these nearly two decades’ worth of exchange, *OT* now seeks to “take the pulse” of the field, a composite field construed as broadly as possible. We do this without in any way suggesting that the measurement is or can be precise or exhaustive; indeed, such is the heterogeneity of our subject that any claim of this sort would be illusory at best. Instead, we aim at a random sampling of what the concept of “oral tradition” means to individual scholars and practitioners, and at what they see as the next challenge(s) in their particular corner of an ever-expanding world of investigation. Here, then, in the interest of divulging the rubric as well as the responses, is the main body of the letter inviting the very brief observations that constitute *OT* for 2003.

Since 1986 our journal *Oral Tradition* has tried to serve as a forum for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. Toward that end we are now planning a special issue devoted to two questions: (1) What is oral tradition (with specific reference to your special field)? and (2) What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies (again in your field)?

We have set aside an entire annual volume for approximately 75-100 short responses from a wide variety of scholars in different areas and from institutions throughout the world, and we are committed to fostering continuation of the discussion on our web site, [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org), should there be interest in doing so. I invite you to have a look at that web site, which now houses E-companions to my *How to Read an Oral Poem* (with video, audio, textual, and bibliographic support), to Mark Bender’s *Plum and Bamboo: China’s Suzhou Chantefable Tradition*, and to Halil Bajgorić’s *The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Bećirbey* (with transcription, translation, and sound-file), as well as searchable indexes of *Oral Tradition* and the bibliography of oral-formulaic theory and research.

The core idea of this special issue is thus to present a collection of very brief comments on basic questions in our shared field. Collectively they should provide readers with a sense of the “state of the art” and perhaps with some useful analogies to use in their own work.

Approximately 95% of those invited agreed to take part, and they submitted their capsule answers to these questions over a period of about six months. Their contributions are published here (and in *OT* 18, ii) virtually in

the form they were received. Among our emphases in the present issue are performance, the Bible, African, Tibetan and Chinese, ancient Greek, Japanese, and Lithuanian, along with entries on Arabic, Basque, South Slavic, and Madagascar. The next issue will feature sections on the medieval world, the ballad, and Hispanic, along with responses on Finnish, the Phillipines, and Celtic. The more than eighty contributions over the two halves of the 2003 volume touch on many other fields as well.

We hope that the result is thought-provoking for our readership. The very nature of the exercise precludes expounding anything at length or saying anything “final,” of course, but that isn’t the point. This collection of perspectives draws whatever strength it may have from its diversity and suggestiveness, that is, from the extent to which its contents awaken ideas within readers’ own disciplines and conceptualizations of “oral tradition.” Think of these often telegraphic responses as an invitation to dialogue, comparison and contrast, and new directions that might translate fluently to your own field.

Finally, as the dedication page at the beginning of this issue indicates, the collection as a whole is offered as a *Festschrift* for Robert Payson Creed, who introduced me to Old English poetry and oral tradition. I remember vividly how he made both subjects vital and very much alive via his daily seminar performances of scenes from *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon. As one of Albert Lord’s early students, and as an accomplished scholar and thinker who has contributed essentially to our grasp of (as he himself put it) the “making of an Anglo-Saxon poem,” Bob has made a singular difference in many of his students’ lives. I present him this tribute on behalf of all of us. *Wes þu, Robert, hal!*

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