

## Oral Theory and Medieval German Poetry

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The word *Mündlichkeit* (Orality) is a major buzz-word in German medieval studies today, and this is attributable in no small measure to the influence, positive and negative, of the oral theory pioneered by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Initially the theory was received with the glamor of the esoteric, which was quickly replaced with the suspicion of an alien notion clearly stamped NOT INVENTED HERE. Over the years, however, progressive scholars have managed to slip some of the theory in the back door while investigating such things as shifts in media and mentality. In passing the theory by, they have also failed to come to terms with it; indeed, we often find a repetition of the fallacious Magoun equation formulaic = oral. Phrases that are held to be formulaic are immediately taken as an indication of oral influence. Even more disconcerting are the wild shifts in position. Recently Joachim Heinzle, an old foe of every aspect of the theory, spent almost an hour of a ninety-minute keynote lecture reviewing Parry's and Lord's work as if he had discovered it himself. A major research center on writing and orality at the University in Freiburg managed to spend a great deal of money and effort on a series of very interesting studies called ScriptOralia, but the oral theory was all but banned from their pages. In a major publication from that center Alois Wolf spent some 450 pages on Germanic heroic epic from the Carolingian period to the High Middle Ages with only the slightest notice of the oral theory (all negative). Theodore Andersson and Alfred Ebenbauer have both mounted spirited defenses of Andreas Heusler's theory of *Lied* vs. *Epos* in which only the short, memorized *Lied* could be oral.

On the other hand, this resistance to the oral theory in its original form has occasionally produced some thoughtful and useful observations. Ursula Schaefer has contributed the term *Vokalität* to our vocabulary, using it to designate the aspects of tradition-derived poetry that make it particularly effective in oral performance (whether it was composed by an illiterate poet or not). Walter Haug has explored ways that flexible texts affect the theory of heroic legend (*Heldensage*). Finally, it must be admitted that some

scholars have integrated the oral theory into their view of medieval German and Germanic literature. Dieter Kartschoke, for example, shows an admirable balance between traditional German literary historiography and the newer observations from the oral theory and elsewhere.

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