



# ORAL TRADITION

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# 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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## Editor's Column

*Oral Tradition* for 2003 presents something quite different from its usual contents. Over this and the last issue we 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, volume 18 of *OT* is 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.

Among our emphases in the present issue are Hispanic, Celtic, Scandinavian, English, and Pan-Asian oral traditions, along with contributions on the ballad and on comparative studies. 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 issue 18, i 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!*

*John Miles Foley, Editor*

## *Hispanic*

Samuel G. Armistead on “Pan-Hispanic Oral Tradition”

Isabel Cardigos on “Folktales”

Marcia Farr on “Oral Traditions in Greater Mexico”

J. J. Dias Marques on “Portuguese Narrative Poetry”

Carlos Nogueira on “Oral Tradition: A Definition”

J. M. Pedrosa on Oral Traditions Worldwide

Suzanne H. Petersen on Greater Collaboration

John Zemke on “Medieval Spanish and Judeo-Spanish”

## **Pan-Hispanic Oral Tradition**

**Samuel G. Armistead**

We are concerned here with the oral traditions of Hispanic or Iberian peoples: speakers of Spanish (Castilian), Portuguese, Catalan, and Judeo-Spanish, and also various Spanish and Portuguese creoles in South America, Africa, and Asia. Basque, as an indigenous language of the Iberian Peninsula, should also definitely be counted as part of the Hispanic world. Oral tradition involves any manifestation of folk culture that includes the use of language. Creativity, ongoing evolution, and chronological depth are also essential factors. The Hispanic oral tradition comprises not only the “classic” genres of folk literature: narrative poetry (ballads, *corridos*), lyric poetry, orally improvised poetry (*décimas*, *puntos*, *bertsoak*), children’s rhymes, riddles, proverbs, folktales, and folk theater, but also local legends, memorates, jokes, folk prayers and incantations (*ensalmos*), cumulative songs, counting-out rhymes, curses and blessings, folk comparisons, calls to animals, tongue-twisters, formulaic phrases, baby talk, thieves’ jargon, microtoponymy, folk beliefs, and, indeed, language itself, in all its diversity, as a constantly changing and consistently creative manifestation of folk culture. Traditional music must, of course, also count as an essential part of the oral tradition.

In the modern Hispanic oral tradition, specific traditional forms, individual text-types, and expressions can still be directly and genetically related to medieval antecedents and even to preliterate congeners. Some local legends, now being recorded and studied for the first time, exhibit astounding connections with classical and pre-Christian traditions. Hispanic toponymy and microtoponymy include various pre-Roman elements: note the Spanish hydronym Deva, which echoes the Celtic belief that each river had its own particular goddess. Some calls to animals clearly date from a time when Arabic co-existed with Hispano-Romance: the Algarvean shepherds’ call *ad-ji!* “come!”; compare Moroccan Arabic *aji*.

In Iberian communities and their overseas extensions, oral and written traditions have constantly and intricately interacted, from the very first vernacular use of writing down to the present day: medieval epics, ballads,

lyric poetry, riddles, proverbs, curses and insults, and folktales (exempla) were all, at least occasionally, written down during the Middle Ages; children's games and rhymes, jokes and anecdotes, and the vocabulary of thieves' jargon all were extensively recorded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; handwritten family ballad and song books, proverb collections, and liturgical drama texts have continued in use almost down to the present. Numerous ballads printed on broadsides have made their way into oral tradition. Brazilian *cordel* (chapbook) poetry, in some cases traceable to medieval archetypes, straddles written and oral tradition.

New directions? Recently we have seen renewed efforts toward classifying the vast corpus of Hispanic folk literature that was brought together during the twentieth century. We now have numerous catalogues and type- and motif-indexes of epics, ballads, lyric poetry, proverbs, and folktales. There are pathfinding new studies on children's rhymes and on improvised poetry. Clearly, these efforts have coincided with an intense awareness of the progressive disappearance of many forms of oral tradition. All the same, outstanding collecting efforts are still going forward on various fronts. Particularly dramatic is current work on local legends in Spain, on *corridos* in Mexico, and on improvised poetry in Spain and Spanish America.

*University of California, Davis*

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## **Folktales**

**Isabel Cardigos**

My area of research is the folktale, marvelous tales in particular. Over the past six years I have been working on a classified index of Portuguese folktales soon to be finished. I envisage oral tradition/oral literature as the outcome of active transmission of a given narrative through many links and over a certain span of time. I would therefore prefer to consider an oral narrative as [using Saussurean terms] a virtual *langue* that can only be studied and understood in the light of many instances of *paroles*, a spectrum of variants.

In Portugal we still have the opportunity to collect stories from narrators who are links in the chain of oral transmission. I therefore strongly encourage paying attention to the narrator in his/her own right and within his/her context. This focus will enable the student to assess conscious processes of variation in folktales. But because narrators (as well as folktales in chapbooks, schoolbooks, and so forth) are also links in the chain of transmission, I am particularly interested in bringing to light less conscious processes of meaning set upon a folktale “language” in progress—an unconscious moving ground of slower variance. I like to extend the comparative analysis of versions by stepping across the types and even genres.

I am intrigued about modern modes of urban/mass/global transmission, and I hope that connections can be made with more “traditional” forms of oral tradition. I find it particularly interesting to witness the recent fashion of urban storytellers and would love to know what kind of future there may be for the storytelling tradition.

*University of the Algarve*

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<sup>1</sup> Guiding references for my work include Alan Dundes, Bengt Holbek, Marie-Louise Ténèze, and Vladimir Propp.

## Oral Traditions in Greater Mexico

Marcia Farr

What Américo Paredes (1993) once called Greater Mexico now exists all over the United States. That is, the Mexican diaspora (perhaps Cuauhtémoc's true revenge) is evident from Alaska to Georgia, and everywhere in between. This presence of Mexicans is particularly notable in Chicago, the global Midwestern city, which now counts a million persons of Mexican descent in its metropolitan area (U.S. Census 2000). Mexicans, like all peoples, bring their oral traditions with them in such transnational migrations.

Mexican oral traditions rely on a wide range of genres, from the more canonical *corridos* (narrative folk songs with poetic structuring; see Herrera-Sobek 1990, Limón 1992), proverbs (Dominguez Barajas 2002), riddles, and jokes to varying types of informal narratives. The richness of these oral traditions illustrates the creativity and high value placed on rhetorical competence (Briggs 1988) within Mexican cultures and the importance of the poetic in Mexican verbal art and life. Although demographers, sociologists, and anthropologists have studied transnational Mexican communities, little work has focused on oral traditions within these populations (Farr 1994, 1998, 2000, in press; Guerra 1998). Oral traditions, of course, can be performed in public, more formal settings, or in private, more intimate ones. The commercialization of *corridos* on CDs enables their almost constant public performance on Spanish language radio stations. At the other extreme are the intimate contexts of family and home, in which oral traditions live on the tongues of and in the space between persons, contexts that are often out of the range of interested researchers.

My deep involvement with a social network of Mexican families, both in Chicago and in their *rancho* (rural hamlet) in northwest Michoacán, over the last decade and a half has given me access to such intimate contexts, and especially to all-female conversations within them. The developing awareness over recent decades of the reflexivity of ethnography allows us to recognize the effect of gender and other identities on the research process. In this respect, my gender has been significant in opening access to the rich

world of female talk in these families, transcending other aspects of identity in importance. I have thus been able to describe three culturally embedded ways of speaking within this group:<sup>1</sup> *franqueza* (frank, candid talk), *respeto* (respectful talk that inscribes traditional age and gender hierarchies), and *relajo* (joking talk that, like fiesta or carnival, turns the social order “upside down” and thus provides a space for social critique). Particularly during the verbal frame of *echando relajo* (joking around), women (and men) address the inevitable tensions of the existing social order, frequently treating gender with a humorous critique. In the storytelling that abounds during *relajo*, people construct their politics with poetry, utilizing parallelism, repetition, quoted dialogue, and other oral poetic devices that persuade through aesthetic pleasure. Given the large and growing number of Mexicans in the U.S., and especially of Mexican children in schools, such portraits of verbal art can persuade teachers and others of the creativity and verbal dexterity in Mexican oral traditions, aspects of communicative competence that can be constructively built on to develop verbal skills in the academic register.

*Ohio State University*

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<sup>1</sup> A book is in progress: *Rancheros in Chicagoacáu: Ways of Speaking and Identity in Mexican Transnational Community*.

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## Portuguese Narrative Poetry

J. J. Dias Marques

My research concerns Portuguese narrative poetry: *romances* (translatable as “ballads”) and *canções narrativas* (literally, “narrative songs”, which differ from the *romances* because of their versification, more recent origin, and less formulaic language). My interest in narrative poetry is due particularly to fieldwork done in several Portuguese regions during the 1980’s. Hence the rapport that I have always felt with actual praxis and the fact that, in my research, I have always been more concerned with texts in themselves than with theoretical reflection. I have, therefore, never really pondered on what oral literature is, but share the idea that it consists of texts orally transmitted that transform themselves and live in different versions—an idea that I believe is common to most ballad scholars, at least in the Pan-Iberian countries. The fact that I stress the oral characteristics of this literature doesn’t mean that I don’t take into consideration the influence of written literature: (1) on the origin of oral texts (which in Portuguese narrative poetry must derive, in the overwhelming majority, from written texts); and (2) during the process of transmission of oral texts, through the influence of written versions read by the singers in books or broadsides (and which impinge on the oral versions previously known by them).

In Portugal the ballad has always been the focus of attention, whereas narrative songs have been marginalized. The recent book by Nogueira (2002) is one of the very few exceptions to this rule. For that reason the study of narrative songs in all its various aspects is, to my mind, essential, beginning with a catalogue that will enable one to know the scope of its corpus. With regard to ballads, it seems to me that the following three areas need particular attention (the first two applying to narrative songs as well). First is the study of the role of memory in the transmission and consequently the transformation of texts, based on research done in psychology (see Rubin 1995 for a stimulating example). Second, the field would gain from the in-depth study of the relationship between Portuguese narrative poems and their counterparts in the balladry of other European countries (Armistead 1997 is an excellent starting-point). The third area deserving

attention concerns that part of the Portuguese versions of ballads that consists of texts published during the nineteenth century, texts that were considerably tampered with by their editors. It seems to me that it is important to study the editing methods of such authors, attempting to understand the motivation behind their actions. Such study will help to clarify the concept that those editors had of oral poetry, which seems to be common to several authors of different nationalities. In fact, there is a striking similarity between the editing and what lies behind it in for instance the works of Sir Walter Scott, Elias Lönnrot, and Estácio da Veiga (see Zug 1976, DuBois 1995:93-125, and Marques 1997:135-60).

*F. C. H. S. / Universidade do Algarve  
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## **Oral Tradition: A Definition**

**Carlos Nogueira**

### **What is oral tradition?**

In the vast system of forms and modes of communication denominated by the syntagma “oral” tradition, which congregates knowledge, memories, values, and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature, objects with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by the laws of traditionality (anonymity, persistence, variation), I position myself specifically in the field of the brief or minimal poetry, lyric (mainly poems of four, five, or six verses) but also narrative-dramatic (traditional narrative songs).

### **New directions**

In the present day, studies on oral tradition cannot afford to overlook the mutations typical of textual typologies, in the co-textual dimension—as in the contexts, the complex of cultural activities from which explicitly or implicitly the texts proceed and with which they interact. As important as the prolation of the text of oral literature through the voice, here and now, without any other channel and vehicle except the natural ones, today we must pay close attention to the transmission/re-creation of the constituent signs of that text materialized in substances and peculiar forms, that is, graphic, visual or audiovisual and resounding, typographic and electronic, digital and analogical forms. The process of mediatization gives density; it democratizes and eternalizes the oral literary word, which, instead of being fossilized by the action of that apparent crystallization, establishes more and more subtle relationships with a public far more massive than the popular audience. And, if we remember that the tradition is a living, dynamic, and malleable organism, then it won't seem problematic to admit the original system of old traditional elements with other more modern features (for example, traditional music or *fado* with dance music). The result is the

appearance of products with artistic and pragmatic dimensions and with a memorial presence larger than that of its more ancient congeners.

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## **Oral Tradition as a Worldwide Phenomenon**

**J. M. Pedrosa**

### **Oral tradition**

It is my view that oral tradition is the source of all of the world's literary traditions. Two principal concerns have driven my work (1995, 2000, 2002): the collection of examples of living oral literature (ballads, songs, proverbs, legends, stories, oral history, and epics) in different countries and traditions (Spain, Hispanoamerica, central Africa), and the comparative study of world literary traditions from Homer to García Márquez.

I have come to the conclusion that oral literature created and influences written literatures, including contemporary works of fiction, in much more profound and decisive ways than is generally recognized. Additionally, oral tradition affords scholars clear and transparent examples of different strategies for creating symbols, metaphors, and motifs. The analysis of oral literature also sheds light on the aesthetic strategies of literary authors whose stylistic sophistication tends to obscure those modes of symbolic, metaphoric, and motific production in their work, strategies that rarely differ from those manifest in oral literature.

### **New directions**

My early research was focused on songs and ballads. Recently, I have become director of the "Atlas of Myth and Legends in the Hispanic World," and of ancillary projects such as the "Atlas of Myth and Legends of the Basque." I am also directing theses on the oral traditions of various countries (Ecuador, Brazil, Niger, Benin, Madagascar, and so on). These experiences have led me to conclude that the field of folk legend, less well-studied than that of the folktale, possesses enormous aesthetic and literary interest, and perhaps even greater sociological and anthropological value. Legends are imbued with more local references, more communal and

ideological values than are stories. The extraordinary and original work of Linda Dégh strikes me, for that reason, as enormously attractive for future research (1995, 2001). The stunning advances made in the study of genetic populations bodes well for projects in comparative cartography: the elaboration of maps and atlases depicting the migration of oral literatures superimposed upon maps tracing demographic and genetic migrations. I believe such studies could flourish in the twenty-first century. It seems to me that the work of specialists such as Luigi Cavalli-Sforza (2000) on the parallel evolution and development of genes, peoples, and languages could usefully be amplified by taking into consideration another element: oral tradition.

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Translated by John Zemke

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For further information on Hispanic, central African, and other oral traditions, see the following journals.

*Estudos de Literatura Oral*, published by Universidade do Algarve, Portugal.

*Revista de Investigaciones Folklóricas*, published in Buenos Aires under the direction of Martha Blache.

## Towards Greater Collaboration in Oral Tradition Studies

Suzanne H. Petersen

A key player among Iberian oral traditions, the pervasive and resilient pan-Hispanic *romancero* merits attention not only for its sheer volume, its vast temporal and geographic span, and its cultural, thematic, and musical diversity, but also for its complex interconnections both with other Hispanic and pan-European verbal art forms and with the learned literary and musical traditions of the Peninsula and beyond.

Of the more than three thousand distinct ballad narratives produced, re-created, and documented in one or more of the five peninsular languages from the fifteenth century to the present day, some one thousand *romances* have been recorded in the modern oral tradition on no fewer than five continents and often in hundreds (and in some cases thousands) of versions.<sup>1</sup>

Differences with respect to other oral genres notwithstanding, Hispanic ballads manifest certain fundamental features and behaviors common to all living traditional art forms.<sup>2</sup> Most notable is the intrinsic openness of their narrative, poetic, and musical structures and their concomitant dynamic and inexorable transformation across time and space in response to changing aesthetic and ethical values and evolving linguistic, ideological, and socioeconomic systems.

As students of the *romancero* we recognize that each time a traditional ballad is re-created (in our case, brought into a singer's repertoire), a unique compromise has been effected between the opposing forces of heredity and innovation at each level of organization of the ballad's

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<sup>1</sup> My online Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project may be accessed at <<http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/>>. It currently includes some 4900 versions of 930 old and modern traditional ballads. Some 200 versions are accompanied by the original field recordings (in streaming media and MP3 formats).

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct, insightful overview of Hispanic oral traditions, including the *romancero*, see Zemke 1998. For a brief history of the Hispanic ballad and a description of its thematic subtypes, see Armistead 1988. For a detailed discussion of poetics of the *romancero*, see Catalán et al. 1988. For an extensive bibliography (5000 citations) see Petersen, <<http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/biblio/index.php>>.

various structures. Yet as researchers rather than bearers of the tradition, we are non-native speakers of this coded oral poetic language and, despite recent progress, we don't fully understand how the forces that govern a ballad's transmission and transformation work.

Given the dynamic nature of the model, it is surely the the case that the larger and more varied our sample of an oral genre (or work), the greater our chances of deciphering its coded language, interpreting its meanings, and understanding its mechanisms of variation. Few stand to benefit more profoundly than oralists from the information technology revolution that has brought us the internet, platform-independent multimedia applications, and web services. We are now discovering how greatly these tools facilitate and enhance appreciation of verbal art forms heretofore largely denied both a voice and a context. For scholars interested in implementing web-based technologies to advance their own research on an oral tradition, the potential benefits go well beyond the dissemination of integrated collections of texts, sound, still images, and video, together with links to relevant secondary information. However, the tools so well-suited to compress and store, process, transfer, and display traditional datasets can readily become a source of considerable frustration for the technologically challenged literary scholar faced with choosing among competing platforms and software and decisions regarding data structure and web interface design. Given the rate at which technology is evolving and the limited availability of technical advice from information specialists who fully grasp the complexities of our data and the programming requirements for sophisticated intertextual comparisons and statistical analysis of extensively cross-referenced data items, we can easily soon come to regret computing decisions we've made along the way. Thankfully, with the advent of XML Web services technologies, solutions to these problems are at hand.

Among its advantages, this flexible model requires no central coordination and imposes no restrictions on the technologies used (hardware platforms, operating systems, software, programming languages, devices, and so on). It permits incremental development of applications and, most importantly, allows linking, sharing, and passing data among independently developed datasets. Any corpus of oral traditional works encoded in a consistent fashion for certain of its features can be converted to XML format and thereafter linked to other XML-tagged documents with which it shares at least one identified characteristic. In our ongoing efforts to establish typologies and correctly interpret the function of such common key elements as motifs, formulas, exordia, refrains, rhetorical devices (and many more features), this ability to query across a large number of diverse, independently developed oral tradition collections will be invaluable.

In preparing our collections for the web, whether we choose to implement the XML Web services model from the outset or postpone

delivering our data in XML format until data transfer speeds improve and our clients' browsers can interpret it more efficiently, our collective and individual interests are best served by working towards referencing and linking all of the world's oral traditions.

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## Medieval Spanish and Judeo-Spanish

John Zemke

Students of medieval Spanish literature can recognize oral tradition (= OT) as substrate, catalyst, reactant, and reagent in the verbal arts created in peninsular Romance vernaculars. Direct and indirect testimony confirm its decisive action on lyric and narrative tokens in those languages, as well as on paremiological forms such as *refranes* (“folk sayings”) and *advinanzas* (“riddles”). OT is a practical instrument, like the clay tablet, codex, or printed page, but exceptional among them: it warrants the singer to create variations within parameters of genre, performance, and audience. Field recordings made throughout the modern Hispanic-speaking world document reflexes of early *romances*, folktales, riddles, proverbs, *villancicos*, and folk remedies, as well as later *corrido* and *décima* forms. The multiple iterations, and the social networks that support them, reveal not immutable texts but bundles of narrative and poetic features diffused nonuniformly in space and time. In this sense the present can be used to explain the past.

OT offers useful interpretive tools. Its anthropological, literary, and folkloristic dimensions account for artistic and cultural features—patterns of sound and rhythm, narrative self-dramatization, the performance arena enveloping performer and audience in which values of group identity are inculcated—unassayed by literalist methods. Medieval vernacular lyric, narrative, and prose share orality in their genesis, transmission, poetics, and aesthetics. To deny the role of OT in the continuum of epic and chronicle, in the corpus of *romances*, or in the tales common to *enxempla*, sermons, and clerical poetry is to obscure their primary verbal dimension and confound their cultural purpose. Adjacent literary traditions affirm the existence of OT in medieval Hispano-Romance before its emergence into vernacular documents. The strophic poetry of the Andalusian *muwashshahat* (“girdle-songs”) in classical Arabic and Hebrew literatures—dense, allusive courtly poems—incorporate into their *kharja* (“exit”) verses drawn from traditional women’s songs of the Hispano-Romance branch. At a later date, the case of Ferrán Verde, a New-Christian merchant imprisoned by the Inquisition in June of 1493, offers a discrete example of orality, or incipient tradition. Given pen and paper, he copied from memory some 220 stanzas of the *Proverbios morales* (“Moral Proverbs”), roughly one-third of a poem

composed 150 years earlier by Shem Tov de Carrión. The practical aspect of OT obtains here on the interface between letter and word.

From the expulsion of 1492 until the mid-twentieth century, OT remained a vital feature for Judeo-Spanish speakers. The *Sephardim* in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa retained pre-exilic *romances* lost on the Peninsula, and exploited the *romance*'s remarkable capacity for absorption by borrowing narratives from surrounding Greek, Slavic, and Arabic cultures, and recasting them on the balladistic aesthetic. Here too, twentieth-century fieldwork recovered ballads unknown in early printed collections, as well as wedding songs, dirges, paraliturgical songs, folktales, and various paremiological expressions. Many of the *romances* with their musical settings have been edited, classified, and analyzed by Samuel Armistead, Joseph Silverman, and Israel Katz in an ongoing project aimed at preserving the cultural legacy of the *Sephardim*. The Judeo-Spanish traditions have lapsed with the passing of the people in whom they lived, victims of the Holocaust. Academic and cultural programs in Israel and Europe for the promotion of Judeo-Spanish are underway and enjoying some success. Full restoration of the language remains, however, a judgment of the future. Scholarly work in this tradition must attend to the recovery of those tokens consigned to writings and recordings of all kinds.

### **New Directions**

Hispanists generally think of OT only in regard to epic and ballad. The monumental contribution of Ramón Menéndez Pidal—who early in the twentieth century recognized and theorized OT for the *romance* and the medieval epic—invigorated critical thinking. Further advances were curtailed by the Individualist-Neotraditionalist polemic that consumed scholarly attention and energy. New theoretical and practical directions for the study of the *romance* have come from a team of collaborators at the Seminario Menéndez Pidal (Madrid), directed by Diego Catalán. Current questions are explored by the articles collected in “Las voces del romancero” (*Insula* 1994) and now *La eterna agonía del romancero* (Piñero Ramírez 2001). The interpretive tools of OT could be employed to advantage for study of the modern Asturian *andar a cantares* (“walking forth songs”) and *asturianada* (“deep song”) (Fernandez 1986) or scrutiny of medieval medical and legal texts.

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# *Ballad*

Mary Ellen Brown on the Popular Ballad

William Bernard McCarthy on “The Implicated Ballad”

Tom Pettit on Ballads and Bad Quartos

## **The Popular Ballad and Oral Tradition**

**Mary Ellen Brown**

I begin with a representative quotation from volume 2 of the Papers of Francis James Child because it offers an ideal avenue into the study of the popular ballad and some of the premises of that study: “These two ballads & a fragment of a third were repeated from memory by my grandmother, who is over ninety years old. She learned them orally & has no recollection of their being printed” (II:229). Such a formulation suggests that popular ballads to be authentic and true are held in memory, are unpublished, are learned orally; they are possessions of the past and we get glimpses of that past largely through the memories of the old. It is an easy move from these assertions to suggest that the ballads belong, certainly originated, in the past, in an oral society, homogeneous and small; what we now have is but a pale reflection of their original glory; their time is past.

Formulations like the above, once a staple of scholarship and not totally discarded today, have tended to freeze the ballad, even to limit it to exemplars that might fit a definition implicitly allied to origins and transmission. And this has meant in large measure that the popular ballad is a Child ballad, separated off from lesser types circulating orally, as well as from broadside materials (early and late), literary appropriations, imitations, and other cultural uses. For by the “classic” criteria, these latter are not authentic; to tell the truth, applying the criteria strictly would eliminate many of the ballads in the Child collection.

Yet the ballad is more genus than genre, more cultural resource and generating concept than a single style of popular verse. It has existed in the past and will exist in the future. And it has always found a home in all the available media, adopting different styles appropriate to a particular cultural moment. At once occasional and historical, it may mark a moment at the time or through reflection. And only sometimes will it be transmitted orally; but even so it can be a ballad.

Most twenty-first-century inhabitants of the Western world will know their ballads in electronic or printed form, the one a technological orality, the other the medium of the academy and the visually oriented. This situation suggests that cultural change may well have extraordinary effect on this

genus, this thing designated “ballad”; and societal position may also well effect how one learns/holds in memory/and transmits.

The concept of oral tradition has had a profound influence on the study of the popular ballad, allowing some exemplars to be valorized, others dismissed as inauthentic, and an ongoing and even vital vernacular, narrative verse tradition all but ignored because it lacks purity, defined in a limited way as oral, old. The lived perimeters of the ballad are broad and allow the oral memory beside the book analysis, the poets’ reformulation, and the musicians’ borrowing.

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## **The Implicated Ballad**

**William Bernard McCarthy**

We used to think of the classic oral ballad of the British Isles and English-speaking North America as ancient, timeless, eternal. Indeed, we used to think of most folklore genres as equally ancient, timeless, and eternal. But the evidence is mounting that as a genre in English and Scots oral tradition the classic ballad may be very time-bound. At its start, obviously, the genre could not have emerged before the beginning of vernacular stanzaic song, nor indeed before the English and Scots languages emerged in the thirteenth century. The evidence of the written record (and the parallel written record of Scandinavian balladry) suggests, moreover, that the form originated as a literate entertainment of late medieval elite culture, and did not settle comfortably into oral tradition until the mid-sixteenth century, taking on at that time the oral characteristics that have been described by Andersen (1985), Buchan (1972), and others. Ironically, this first appearance of an oral ballad tradition in the British Isles is almost exactly contemporary with the rise of popular culture, and especially a popular press, in those islands. As a result, from the very beginning the tradition has been “contaminated” by popular broadside texts.

But the element of popular culture that may have had the strongest impact on this oral tradition is the cheap guitar that began to be available late in the nineteenth century. The guitar affected both tune and text. Singers who accompanied themselves by strumming chords on a guitar naturally adapted the tonality and contour of their tunes to fit classic harmonic structures. The tonality shifted from monophonic modal airs to major and minor tunes with implied harmony. (Some Dorian tunes survived because airs in this scale—like the minor, but with a raised sixth—are usually adaptable to an accompaniment consisting of two successive minor chords, such as Dm and Em). This loss of melodic freedom was accompanied by loss of rhythmic freedom. An unaccompanied singer is not forced to be rhythmically regular, but once the singer starts strumming, regularity follows. Such rhythmic regularity in melody in turn forced increased regularity in prosody. The old four-beat or three-beat line with variable numbers of non-accented syllables still appeared in some unaccompanied performances, but alongside these appeared ballads in a more even

alternation of accented and unaccented syllables. Thus the guitar edged the ballad tradition closer to popular culture melodically, harmonically, and prosodically.

Nonetheless, we could still speak unambiguously about an oral tradition (that is, a family or community tradition passed on in face-to-face communication) until some time in the middle of the twentieth century. Over the first half of that century people who knew and sang ballads were already becoming aware of other versions and other songs on the radio, on records, in books, and elsewhere. But by the 1960s, automobiles and paved roads meant that singers could easily gather at festivals, share at folk clubs, visit one another, and get to record stores. All this sharing was facilitated by both entrepreneurs and academics. Soon there was no excuse for any interested singer not to know many more ballads and other folk songs than were available in the immediate family or community (oral) tradition. As a result, today, through the agency of academia, the electronic media, and modern transportation, the ballad tradition is so thoroughly implicated in popular culture that it is impossible—were it even desirable—to disentangle it. The ballad is very much alive, but it is no longer the ballad of classic Scots and Appalachian oral tradition. Still, four hundred years isn't bad for an oral tradition. Homer may not have had any more.

Ballad scholars today are much interested in this implication of balladry in popular culture. But scholars also study the great singers and collectors of the past, the textual record, the aesthetic, prosodic, structural, and other characteristics of the ballad from the classic era, and the implication of the ballad into the lives of singers and into the eras in which they lived. There are abundant opportunities to study the ballad of today and the singers who perform, teach, record, and re-create the tradition. But thanks to several group efforts to make available great collections from the past, including the just completed Greig-Duncan collection (Shuldham-Shaw, Lyle et al. 1981-2002), recent publications of the Scottish Texts Society, the forthcoming Glenbuchat Ballad Manuscript (Buchan), and the project to digitize and publish the Carpenter Collection ([www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter](http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter)), our window on the oral tradition of the ballad is widening considerably. It remains to be seen how scholars will take advantage of these new opportunities.

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## **Ballads and Bad Quartos: Oral Tradition and the English Literary Historian**

**Tom Pettitt**

For the historian of late-medieval and Renaissance literature, oral tradition lies provocatively athwart one of the literary canon's more problematic borders. In a fit of gothic enthusiasm ballads were admitted into literary history, but folktales, legends, folk plays, and lyric folksongs merit attention only as possible sources and analogues for literary works, rarely if ever as cultural achievements in their own right.<sup>1</sup> And their admission would require a substitute ("illiterature"? "oraliterature"?), for a term closely associated with written and printed letters. (I have settled for "word-art," which can have both visual, i.e. textual-read and oral/aural, i.e. uttered-heard modes, although a respected colleague has suggested that "word-craft" might be less pretentious).

Indigenous English oral traditions independent of the written word were of course massively compromised by the eruption of the popular culture of cheap printing in the course of the early modern period. There is a grim consolation in the realization that slavery, followed by the virtual exclusion of African Americans from access to literacy deep into modern times, ensured the creation and persistence of vigorous English-language traditions of oral rhetoric, narrative, and song in the United States, destined to explode into the rock, rap, and reggae that in retrospect may threaten the integrity of the literary canon more than any fairytale ever could.<sup>2</sup>

For the student of early English literature, oral tradition is consequently an issue only in limited segments where its residual significance is potentially one of the factors influencing the surviving form

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<sup>1</sup> Deservedly so, if one went by Adam Fox's *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (2000), which, written under the auspices of a distinguished school of English social history, is more interested in context and function than literary quality: its "ballads" are not those encompassed by literary history.

<sup>2</sup> For some tentative remarks see Pettitt 1994 (copies happily supplied by author); a classic "oral-formulaic" study of a major African American cultural tradition is Evans 1982.

of verbal artifacts. Whatever may be the case with the Middle English romances,<sup>3</sup> this is extremely likely for the popular (“Child”) ballads, some of which probably acquired their distinctive generic features in, and from the impact of, oral tradition. The latter (I have asserted) is a “ballad machine” shaping material that started as something else (holy legends, minstrel tales, broadsides) into a “balladic” narrative mode. A ballad is what in another context folklorist Max Lüthi termed the *Zielform*, the ineluctable end product, to which oral tradition molds verbal material. The process can be likened to the wearing of cloth, or the decay of a half-timber building, revealing the structures essential to hold the artifact together. Or to use a less pleasant image as the price of a clever wordplay, ballads result not so much from composition, or even recomposition, as decomposition: the “balladic” result of what decades or centuries of oral tradition do to, say, a journalistic broadside is analogous to the skeleton in the niche of the medieval “cadaver tombs” in English cathedrals, a reminder of the ultimate fate, the *Zielform* of the body whose *Urform* is represented by the imposing effigy above.<sup>4</sup>

Ballads will remain peripheral to the literary canon, but thoughts about oral tradition are contributing to the philological turmoil at its very heart, in connection with the textual instability of the plays of Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists, as manifested by the textual variation among the surviving folios and quartos. Long considered an awkwardness that it was the task of editorial skills to overcome in reconstituting the authorial text, this instability is increasingly acknowledged as endemic to the theatre of the time, untreatable by conventional philology, and really rather interesting in its own right. While excitement is currently greatest in connection with plays whose variations may be due to the bard’s own deliberate revisions, some attention is also being devoted to the “bad” quartos, which may in some way reflect what the actors did to the text. This inevitably included memorizing and reproducing from memory in performance, and the transmission of a part from one actor to another without the intervention of the written script cannot be ruled out. And indeed some “bad” quartos, juxtaposed with a text closer to what the author wrote,

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<sup>3</sup> For a sceptical overview see Duggan’s review (1993) of McGillivray (1990); we await the impact on English studies of Vitz 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. [www.churchmousewebsite.co.uk/cadavertombs/cadavertombs.htm](http://www.churchmousewebsite.co.uk/cadavertombs/cadavertombs.htm). This paragraph reflects my own ballad researches, most recently reported in Pettitt 1997 and 2001a. For a recent informed review of the ballad in relation to “tradition” (in several senses), see Atkinson 2002:espec. ch. 1.

display some of the features that in the case of ballads demonstrably resulted from the impact of oral tradition.<sup>5</sup>

But of course those of us seeking to listen to the dead can never hear what they expressed as aural word-art; we can only see it as visual word-art, in a text that in some sense is, and by some means was, a recording of performance: “The Lass of Roch Royal” as sung by Mrs. Brown of Falkland to her nephew at the piano-forte; Hamlet memorially reconstructed by disgruntled players for a printer. Before we understand what this process of re-textualization did to the verbal material, we can have no certainty that we are witnessing the results of its earlier de-textualization, what the singer sang or the actor said.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The currently standard work on the “bad” quartos, Maguire 1996, applies somewhat strict criteria for discerning oral symptoms; for a more optimistic view see Pettitt 2001b. Lene B. Petersen at the University of Bristol is well advanced on postgraduate studies that include further pursuit of this line of approach.

<sup>6</sup> Pertinent and disturbing studies in this respect include Niles 1993 and Taylor 2001.

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## *Celtic*

Mary-Ann Constantine on “Thoughts on Oral Tradition”

Sioned Davies on Welsh Storytelling and Sermons

Dafydd Johnston on Medieval Welsh Poetry

Joseph Falaky Nagy on “Fighting Words”

## Thoughts on Oral Tradition

Mary-Ann Constantine

It is easier, I think, to say what oral tradition can be rather than what it is. I have been working in the field of Celtic literature for a dozen or so years, and have been moving in and out of more or less oral genres from the start. If, as I do, you are basically working with texts, it is of course the “more or less” that shapes one’s sense of orality, and mine has shifted with each new project.

With medieval Welsh prose, for example, I was quickly irritated with critics who tried to rationalize the inconsistencies of plot and motivation in the tightly-packed, layered stories of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Why anyone should want to know where the Mysterious Claw came from, much less worry about why it had to snatch a newborn colt every May Eve was beyond me. What mattered was that it did. As a critical stance this doubtless leaves much to be desired, but even a passive acceptance of how things are can be a way of learning a language, of absorbing patterns and structures. With its elliptical references to unknown heroes and events, the *Mabinogi* taught me that stories existed “out there” beyond the text, and that it was best not to be too literal-minded in trying to track them down. Early Welsh poetry, especially the haunting runs of three-lined *englynion*, taught me to listen to the cumulative effect of rhyme and rhythm, to try to read the texts as a score.

Working with the ballads of nineteenth-century Brittany, a new element appeared: place. The Breton *gwerziou* are rooted in the local landscape—their stories are connected to real churches, rocks, crossroads. Here again the extratextual, the dimension beyond the song itself, was crucial: the song both represented it, and opened a door into it. I became especially interested in the shorter, more elliptical texts: the less they said, the greater the fascination. Barre Toelken’s work has been a great inspiration here: his studies of the connotative and metaphorical nature of song idiom, and his emphasis on the importance of an active, engaged audience, have opened up all kinds of possibilities in the field. Gerald Porter and I have recently pursued these ideas in an exploration of “fragments” in

traditional song, drawing on ballads, lyrics, blues, work songs, and gypsy songs to explore the many ways that supposedly “degenerate” or incomplete pieces convey meaning. This work, of course, brings the study of folk song towards notions of traditional referentiality explored by John Foley and others in the context of epic.

My current interest is in the eighteenth century, in the “discoverers” of oral tradition, those who first shaped the debate about the nature of orality. The stonemason Iolo Morganwg, prime reviver (and canny reinventor) of lost traditions in Wales, devised an extraordinarily didactic—but also bravely democratic—form of orality, the effects of which can still be felt not only in the National Eisteddfod but in poetry-reciting competitions in Welsh villages to this day. For Iolo, safeguarding ancient truths was a public affair: “Bardic Tradition walks in open day and beaten tracks—in the eye of light, as its own language emphatically has it” (Williams 1794:II, 222).

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## **From Storytelling to Sermons: The Oral Narrative Tradition of Wales**

**Sioned Davies**

As someone whose main interest is storytelling in medieval Wales, orality, aurality, and performance are key issues in any analysis of the Middle Welsh prose corpus, especially in matters relating to style and structure. The tales reflect their sources in *cyfarwyddyd* (traditional lore), and as such give us an insight into the oral performances of the medieval Welsh *cyfarwydd* (storyteller). Ideas regarding the conventions of an oral performance can be explored by analyzing the narratives of twentieth-century storytellers collected by the Museum of Welsh Life, an area that needs further detailed study. Recently, there have been attempts to suggest the chronology of manuscript versions of certain medieval prose texts by recourse to their “oral” features, and theories proposed regarding the changes that occur as an oral tale establishes itself in the new literary medium. However, more research needs to be undertaken before we can use features such as tagging conventions, conjunctive cohesion, and structure of formulae as benchmarks. A University of Wales project is currently involved in transcribing the earliest of our medieval Welsh prose texts up to the middle of the fourteenth century; by May 2004, two CD-ROMs will have been published bringing the contents of about 44 manuscripts into the public domain, a total of some 2,000,000 words. This will be an invaluable tool for the study of not only the linguistic but also the stylistic features (including formulaic content) of our medieval prose texts.

There has always been a tendency to see the Middle Ages as the Golden Age of Welsh storytelling. Certainly, from the sixteenth century onwards there is a clear impression of an oral narrative tradition in decline. However, from the mid-eighteenth century an extremely rich oral culture came to the fore in the context of nonconformist religion, and evidenced not only by the sermon but also by extemporaneous prayer. This is an area of research that is beginning to be explored, drawing in part on the

methodologies of Bruce Rosenberg's *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (1988) and Robert H. Ellison's *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1998). A project is under way at Cardiff University, analyzing the primary sources for evidence of orality/literacy/performance features in the dramatic sermons of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the biographies of individual preachers, personal recollections, religious artifacts and ephemera, and architectural features of the chapels themselves. As well as being important *per se*, it is hoped that a study of Welsh preaching will also illuminate the storytelling culture of medieval Wales—the demands of orality, aurality, and performance have left their mark on the dramatic sermons and the medieval tales alike.

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## **Oral Tradition in Medieval Welsh Poetry: 1100-1600**

**Dafydd Johnston**

Very little research has been done in this field, although there is in fact a rich body of evidence for the oral or memorial transmission of Welsh poetry in the later medieval period. As far as composition is concerned there is no direct evidence of poets' practices, but nevertheless it is generally assumed that they would not have had recourse to writing (the earliest definite holograph texts date from the late fifteenth century, and even those are fair copies of poems composed previously). Since almost all the court poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries has survived in a unique text copied about 1300, the opportunity for study of variance in transmission is limited. The only poem of that period which can be seen to have survived through oral as well as written tradition is Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch's elegy to the last of the princes of Gwynedd that marked the end of Welsh political independence in 1282; two late fifteenth-century versions that differ very substantially from the supposedly authoritative text in the *Red Book of Hergest* can perhaps be explained as a reoralization from memory of that earlier text.

Evidence for oral transmission is much more abundant from the fourteenth century onwards, following the emergence of the popular *cywydd* meter. The poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym and Iolo Goch in particular seem to have been preserved mainly by oral tradition for at least a hundred years, until the mid-fifteenth century. The number of extant versions over the following three centuries is often as many as fifty, and the variants between them show how much the texts of the poems changed due both to faulty memory and to creative recomposition. Oral transmission is proved most conclusively by substantial variations in line order, which are hardly likely to have occurred within a written tradition; other significant features are substitution of synonyms and like-sounding words, and varying attributions. Oral transmission has been seen primarily as an occasional hindrance in the restoration of the original text; only recently has its prevalence been

recognized and interest been taken in its processes for their own sake. Oral tradition will be a key issue in a University of Wales research project on the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, running from 2002-6, one of the outcomes of which will be an electronic edition enabling the presentation of variant versions in parallel. The concept of the original text is a difficult issue here, and it may be that some variant readings go back to differing versions composed by the poet himself. Nevertheless, the idea of an authoritative text belonging to a named author does seem to have been meaningful in this tradition, not least because of the highly complex metrical adornments (*cynganedd*) that preserved a good deal of the text in fixed form. This was highly artistic poetry that was also genuinely popular, transmitted both by professional reciters and poets and by amateurs of the gentry class.

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## **Fighting Words**

**Joseph Falaky Nagy**

In reference to the body language that both launches the oral performance and sets the stage for the spoken or sung word to work its effect upon the audience, Paul Zumthor said: “In its primary function, before the influences of writing, voice does not describe, it acts. It leaves to gestures the responsibility of designating the circumstances” (1990:40). A similar function, of contextualizing oral performance, can often be attributed to gesture that is depicted *within* the performance, specifically in the story told or the situation described. Richard P. Martin (1989), Dwight F. Reynolds (1995), and John H. McDowell (2000), among others, have taught us much about the identification of the performer striving to be the best at what he does with the protagonist determined to live up to a heroic code, and about the extent to which real performers and fabulous warriors in diverse traditions speak with a common voice, expressive of a shared ethos that highlights the delicate balance between preserving heroic dignity and upholding collective interests. The heroicization of the performer and the poeticization of the hero on the level of *language*, whether these are conscious or unconscious processes, surely extend to the level of *depicted* gesture as well. When a traditional singer or storyteller describes what a hero *does*, even if it is non-verbal action, might it not correspond to the “heroic” act of singing the song, or telling the story? And are not valuable clues as to the traditional understanding of the nature of oral composition and performance to be gleaned from descriptions of the hero’s gestures, specifically of his often distinctive way of coping with seemingly overwhelming forces poised against him, and shaping them into a vehicle for the perpetuation of his fame? In my own field, the study of Celtic storytelling traditions as reflected in the medieval literatures of Ireland and Wales, the examination of heroic duels as performances, and of the metaphorical implications of *striking*, *throwing*, *leaping*, and other heroic gestures—strategies not only for overcoming an opponent but also for responding to the threat of ignominy or obscurity that would follow in the wake of defeat—reveals a “heroics” of storytelling and of representing

tradition, whether in oral or written form. The pen, or the mouth, may or may not be mightier than the sword, but these instruments of authority are subtly connected indeed.<sup>1</sup> And our understanding of oral tradition will be well served by further study of these connections, both within and beyond the Celtic realms.

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<sup>1</sup> The poet-hero link is explored in many of the contributions to a Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford (Jones and Nagy forthcoming), who in his work has contributed mightily to our understanding of “heroic poets/poetic heroes” such as the Welsh legendary figure of Taliesin.

## *Scandinavian*

Michael Chesnutt on Norse-Icelandic Orality

Lauri Harvilahti on “Folklore and Oral Tradition”

Stephen Mitchell on “Reconstructing Old Norse Tradition”

Gísli Sigurðsson on “Medieval Icelandic Studies”

## **Orality in a Norse-Icelandic Perspective**

**Michael Chesnutt**

Students of early Scandinavian literature and folklore face analogous problems when dealing with oral tradition. For most readers of the Icelandic sagas, that tradition constitutes no more than a stylistic and factual backdrop to the developed artistry of literary narrators taking their cue from works written at the major centers of European civilization; for most folklorists of the early twenty-first century, oral narrative has more to do with individual self-expression than with loyalty to the collective memory. One Scandinavian folklorist has gone so far as to question the validity of the international folktale typology of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (Aarne and Thompson 1961), stating that the nineteenth-century records of oral prose tradition rather give the impression of kaleidoscopic variation of motifs and episodes. This influential scholar also held that complex folktales probably could not be remembered over long periods of time (Holbek 1987:256).

In ballad research a similar trend has been perceptible under the influence of the oral-formulaic theory, the stability of the inherited song text being played down in favor of spontaneous re-creation in performance. Some East European and Irish folklorists insist, however, that the oral transmission process is (or was) understood by tradition bearers themselves as essentially reproductive. In a West and North European context the role of verbatim memorization has undoubtedly been underestimated: once famous but now-forgotten examples include the Icelandic scribe who reconstructed a saga lost in the great Copenhagen fire of 1728 (Helgason 1926:42-44), and the illiterate Irishman some two centuries later who could repeat a romantic tale almost word for word as it had been read to him from a published edition (Ó Duilearga 1981:xi). The fate of oral literature has in fact been interwoven with that of written literature at least since the introduction of printing, or in the Icelandic context since paper manufacturing made it possible to multiply manuscript books at low cost. As a reassurance to those who doubt the viability of long narratives

surviving in oral tradition over many centuries, we can point to the written texts that both reflected and sustained the art of recitation.

In recent decades there have been tendencies for folklorists on the one hand simply to abandon the study of oral literature in its historical perspective, and on the other hand to adopt the reductionist view that all oral narrative is derived from written models. The second trend is a predictable and necessary reaction to the romantic picture of the bookless folk, but it presses the subjugation of oral to written tradition too hard. We can be quite certain that the tales of the Brothers Grimm in Germany or of Asbjørnsen and Moe in Norway have exerted normative influence on the oral storytelling of the nineteenth century, and that saga and ballad manuscripts helped to keep alive the memory of medieval literary texts. But at the same time there is compelling evidence of preliterate storytelling in Europe, and I do not think that this evidence will go away because of the reluctance of some scholars to integrate it into their treatments of folk literature and saga.

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## **Folklore and Oral Tradition**

**Lauri Harvilahti**

Whereas some of the cultural models for folklore are of a relatively constant nature, performing situation and variation are characteristically unstable features of oral tradition. There is no definition of folklore that would cover the whole discipline. Folklore in its oral and traditional form is in most cases transmitted orally and serves as shared tradition-based creations of a cultural community. I would not include public sector or applied folklore within this concept of oral tradition: the manifestations of applied folklore include folk festivals, various folk song and dance ensembles, or folklore festivals held all over the world. Applied folklore does not have the status of folklore proper.

The Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society has used an inventory or classification system based on the division of folklore into loosely defined genre groups. This system is particularly applicable to manuscript materials (older material in archives) and is still in use. It should be stressed that this system was created on the basis of Finnish folk material and therefore includes non-universal, national categories. But it was augmented as researchers in folk traditions turned their attention toward new materials and subject areas. The bulk of early collecting efforts was concentrated solely on ancient oral (folk) poetry in the Kalevala meter; gradually interests broadened to include *Märchen* (tales) as well, and the first half of the twentieth century saw the gradual inclusion of legends, rhymed folksongs, proverbs, and so forth. In time, the system covered the bulk of Finnish agrarian oral culture. For the sake of clarity, the following sketch of contents has been slightly simplified.

### **The archived oral tradition**

The real collection of folklore began in Finland in the first half of the last century with poems and charms in Kalevala meter. These were joined at the turn of century by folktales, in the 1930s by legends, and gradually all

fields of agrarian folklore—proverbs and riddles, the belief tradition, laments, and so on. The old archived lore includes relatively little contextual data, that is, information on the situation in which it was performed and on the performers themselves.

### **Memory lore collected from aging tradition bearers**

Over the past few decades folklore research in Finland has exploited what can be called passive tradition-bearers. By this I mean that there are in Finland very many people who are unable, in a changing environment, to adapt the folklore they once learned, but who have stored in their memories feelings of identity that can be actualized by means of collection. This increasingly rare channel for the expression of tradition is particularly important because modern research methods can be applied to traditional items for folkloristic research, and the mechanisms for recalling and producing folklore can be studied by social scientific, psychological, and linguistic methods. The emphasis in this field of research is (in addition to conventional activities associated with classification) on contextual analysis and systematization.

### **Contemporary oral tradition**

Many genres of folklore have vanished forever with the passing of the last tradition-bearers familiar with them. Yet there is living folklore all around us: complex work-place lore, various contemporary tales, legends and anecdotes, rumors, gossip, parodies on proverbs and riddles, the rich children's traditions. It will be interesting to see the relationship between traditional agrarian folklore material and contemporary forms of folklore in the selection of research materials in the near future, and also the sort of traditional taxonomy and other classification practices established for studying these newcomers. I should like to mention here the perspectives contributed by the theory of Immanent Art, ethnopoetics, cognitive sciences, structuralism, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, as well as the notions of folkloristic variation, intertextuality, communicative competence, and computer analysis. These developments all represent a shift away from the world of old text-criticism, of purely and solely diachronic or typologically

oriented frameworks, and they also mean a shift away from the world of grammar-like structures and compositional device systems toward new syntheses.

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## **Reconstructing Old Norse Oral Tradition**

**Stephen Mitchell**

The written residue of oral tradition from the medieval Nordic world encompasses a wide variety of pan-national genres, including charms, legends, and genealogical lore, but modern scholarly attention has generally focused on two areas: (1) the prose (and often prosimetrical) Icelandic sagas and (2) traditional poetry in its two dominant forms, eddic and scaldic.

Many factors play into this somewhat restricted image of what constituted oral tradition in the hyperborean Middle Ages—obviously, manuscript preservation and the issue of what materials have come down to us are key elements, but so too are, among others, the effects of early modern nation-building, nineteenth-century nationalism, and contemporary aesthetic tastes. Certainly one important aspect of the emphasis on saga literature is the broad appeal the Icelandic sagas hold for modern audiences, a fascination easily apprehended in that they are characteristically complex narratives exhibiting sophisticated literary portraiture and realistically detailed events. The topics of the sagas vary from historical, legendary, religious, and contemporary themes to the completely fantastic, and as such they offer an inclusive and panoramic view of medieval Nordic cultural life, narrative imagination, and attitudes toward the past and the heroic. Whether these marvelous medieval texts are to be seen as (1) reflections of a vibrant oral culture absorbing and codifying elements of the world around their authors, or (2) merely reflexes of written texts borrowed from abroad, or (3) some compromise between the two extremes, borrowing freely from available foreign models but also incorporating much native tradition, has historically dominated perceptions and scholarly debates about the sagas (Andersson 1964), and although occasionally new models emerge (Lönnroth 1976), it is clear that the weight of the nativist—anti-nativist arguments remains a powerful influence on academic treatments of the topic. Eddic poetry principally concerns itself with mythological and heroic themes, whereas scaldic verse tends toward praise, memorial, and occasional poetry, but it should be noted that scaldic panegyrics also take up, for example,

Christian religious themes. The frequently noted performance contexts of such poetry have played a particularly prominent role in discussions of oral composition and delivery of such works in medieval Scandinavia (Bauman 1986; Harris 2000).

Perhaps the greatest change in the study of medieval Norse saga literature and lore over the past 100 years has been an enhanced appreciation for the cultural context of these materials—not just How were they formulated, but With what patronage? Under what circumstances? With what audience in mind? With what expectations? Declaimed? Read silently? and so on. Once such wonderful works had been wrenched from the hands of a desiccating formalism dedicated to a fixed text and an equally alkaline literary criticism that saw only words on a page, an understanding of the Norse materials' potential as ethnic textual photograph *and* literary wonderwork was available, a synthetic view that exhibits allegiance to neither extremist position but understands the potential for developing a much-needed symbiosis between them. The works of Lars Lönnroth have been of special importance in this regard (e.g., 1980), and have had a marked impact on several generations of scholars in North America and Europe. A recent work by Gísli Sigurðsson (2002) challenges many assumptions concerning our (in)ability to reconstruct medieval orality from surviving documents and offers new insights into the character of the sagas' oral background.

If the trend in saga scholarship has been one of increased contextualization, modern consideration of Norse poetry has likewise been marked by an enhanced appreciation for “performance contexts,” that is, an increased understanding for how an “ethnography of speaking” assists us in reading such texts (e.g., Mitchell 2002). Alongside such performance-oriented approaches, sophisticated considerations employing codicology and literary criticism in new ways (e.g., Harris 1983; Quinn 1992), have led to important re-evaluations of the poetic corpus and its potential relationship to oral tradition.

Far from exhausting the possibilities of spiritual culture in the Nordic Middle Ages (see, for example, the overview in Mitchell 2000), the Icelandic sagas and poetic materials give us a glimpse into how rich the nature of oral narration must once have been in that world, as do other components of Iceland's “learned lore,” such as Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *ars poetica* (known as *Snorra edda*). Medieval Icelandic antiquarianism, which has so happily preserved these phenomenal texts, also suggests what happens when such interest is lacking: the demographically much larger and politically more powerful cultural areas of medieval Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, each of which also boasted a substantial

court culture lacking in Iceland, have preserved nothing like the prose and poetic works we have from that insular nation.

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## **Medieval Icelandic Studies**

**Gísli Sigurðsson**

In the field of medieval Icelandic studies, “the oral tradition” refers to the accumulated and encyclopedic knowledge (both sacred and profane) that was passed on from person to person before and after writing was first introduced into the newly Christianized society of Iceland. This tradition commonly used stories and poetry as a medium, as well as special training in the oratorical art of law.

Iceland, which had previously lain undiscovered in the middle of the North Atlantic, was first settled by people from Scandinavia, Scotland, Ireland, Shetland, the Orkneys, and the Hebrides in the late ninth century, a mixture of pagans and others who had come into contact with Christianity.

The people of Iceland decided to accept Christianity as their official religion in the year 1000, thus providing an opening for a more systematic use of writing and books than before. At first, that writing was used exclusively within the Church, but in the twelfth century it gradually began to involve a broader cultural sphere, documenting historical memory (from the church’s viewpoint), legal texts, and, from around 1200, secular accounts dealing with the kings and earls of Scandinavia and the Orkneys. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stories about local farmers and chieftains in Iceland began to appear (the sagas). In the thirteenth century, the technique of writing was also used to augment the oral training of poets by providing a written mythological background for the poetic language as well as a means of recording the traditional oral poetry that dealt with the gods and heroes of the Germanic peoples (the Eddas).

All of this is so unique in content and so different in nature from the learned book culture of medieval Europe that it cannot be explained or interpreted except as a literary reflection of an oral tradition, in other words as “orally derived texts” to use John Miles Foley’s expression (1991). It nonetheless lies within the nature of the oral tradition, as in the art of writing, that one can expect some influence, both ideologically and

structurally, to have come from books brought to Iceland from the continent (Clover 1982).

Confirmation of the broad and anonymous social memory reflected in the written texts about when and how the country was first settled towards the end of the ninth century is found in modern archaeology. The same applies to the social memory concerning the settlement of Greenland and the voyages that went from there and Iceland to the New World (called Helluland, Markland, and Vinland in the tradition) around the year 1000. All of this was remembered without the aid of the written word, but the accounts were of course influenced by the active rules and needs of the art of storytelling, which would have shaped the form of presentation. This information could not have been made up or obtained by writers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from any other source than the oral tradition. This underlines the fact that if we wish to make any sense of the extant written documents, we need to try and draw up as clear a picture as possible of the oral tradition that lay behind them. Furthermore, we need to take that tradition into account when reading over these documents.

The most interesting new direction in this field comes when we move away from the old argument about whether and if these texts were based on an oral tradition (Andersson 1964; Danielsson 2002a and 2002b), and simply accept the need to read them as the product and reflection of such a tradition. This enables us to utilise all the knowledge gained from the fieldwork and theoretical discussion about the oral tradition of our own time, practically applying it to the world of these early texts (Clover 1986; Sigurðsson 2002). By using such an approach, we can reach a better understanding of the historical development from the oral stage to that of the written culture (something that was taking place at the same time as our early texts came into being). Indeed, we gain a fuller appreciation of the literary aesthetics of the Eddas and sagas when reading them as orally derived texts. At the same time we gain a better comprehension of how they can be used by us as a reflection of the social reality and historical past of which both the tradition and the later written texts formed a living part.

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## *English*

Mark C. Amodio on “Medieval English Oral Tradition”

Robert Payson Creed on How the *Beowulf* Poet Composed

Lori Ann Garner on “Medieval Voices”

Heather Maring on Old English Verse

John D. Niles on “Prizes from the Borderlands”

Andy Orchard on Looking for an Echo

## **Medieval English Oral Tradition**

**Mark C. Amodio**

For nearly fifty years, the medieval English oral tradition has been one of the most intensely studied of all the world's oral traditions,<sup>1</sup> but it has so far proved to be an extremely difficult one both to define and to understand. In addition to the issues that confront everyone who works with long-silent, entexted oral traditions—among which are fundamental questions about how a given culture's verbal art was composed/produced/presented/encoded/received—there are a number of other issues that are specific to the English tradition in the Middle Ages. Chief among these is that the tradition itself has quite understandably long been viewed as two largely discrete traditions, the Anglo-Saxon and the Middle English, rather than as a single, evolving one. The Norman Conquest brought about (or in some cases simply accelerated) many significant linguistic, cultural, social, and political changes, but the expressive economy of the English oral tradition—its richly associative oral poetics—survives the Conquest (in admittedly varying degrees of intactness) and continues to influence the production and reception of medieval English poetry even as the tradition itself grows and changes through its contact with continental traditions and practices.

The traditional “words”<sup>2</sup> of the English oral tradition—its specialized, meaningful idiom of lexeme, phrase, theme, and story-pattern—have been particularly hard for us to identify in texts from the post-Conquest period, in part because doing so requires that we recalibrate the oral theory that has been so profitably applied to Old English poetry and in part because we simply haven't looked for them in a systematic and thorough manner. Further, the understandable stress laid upon performance in the still widely influential theory of oral-formulaic composition has also contributed to our

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<sup>1</sup> See Foley 1985 and the updates to this annotated bibliography available at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the specialized nature of traditional “words,” see Foley 2002:11-21.

difficulty in defining the medieval English oral tradition. While a performative tradition must have existed at some point in England's history, the corpus of verbal art extant from the Middle Ages is by definition written, and so necessarily non-performative.<sup>3</sup> Whether *Beowulf* comes from the mouth of a dictating singer, from a scribe's best recollection of a heard performance, straight from the mind and pen of a scribe/poet, or through some combination of these and/or other possible means of composition and transmission, we need to recognize that the Old English poem is as fully a written text as is the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Acknowledging the non-performative nature of medieval English poetry will not forestall inquiry into the medieval English oral tradition, but will rather enable us to begin assessing more accurately the mix of oral and literate poetics found throughout the period's extant verbal art.

While oralists who focus on medieval English literature are currently pushing the theory in a number of new, promising directions, seeing the oral tradition and its entexted oral poetics as integral components of an extraordinarily complex cultural matrix, one in which the oral and the literate intersect with and deeply inform each other, is among the most promising and potentially most important ones.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On non-performative Anglo-Saxon oral poetics, see Amodio 2004a and 2000: 196-202 on post-Conquest oral poetics.

<sup>4</sup> See further the essays collected in Amodio 2004b.

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## How the *Beowulf* Poet Composed His Poem

Robert Payson Creed

Received wisdom has it that the *Beowulf* poet put together his poem halfline by halfline (“verse” by “verse”). My work on the poem over the past fifty years has led me to think that we can begin to understand how the poet composed his tale, clause by clause, only if we turn our attention to the whole lines in which he told the story.

The poet built each four-measure-line—and each of the rare five- and six-measure lines—around the alliteration of the root syllables of stressed words. His tradition seems to have provided him with many alliterating word pairs that encapsulate culturally significant ideas. For example, the poet built five lines around the pair *dom* (achievement) and *deað* (death)—*dom* before death, at least seven lines around the pair *eorl* (nobleman) and *ellen* (brave action), and nine around the pair *sop* (truth) and *secgan* (say). This does not mean, however, that the poet was constrained to frame each clause within the confines of a single alliteration: rather, he composed many passages with suppleness and flexibility simply by beginning a new clause in the middle of the line. This expedient left him free to develop the clause around different alliterations.

The rhythm of the poem is based on the stress patterns of the poet’s language; most Old English words, like *ellen* or *secgan*, begin with a heavier stress and end with a lighter stress. This pattern translates to a downbeat followed by an upbeat, the simplest kind of rhythm. Each measure of the poem repeats this rhythm. Yet there is no question of monotony: though all measures are identical in rhythm and theoretically identical in the length of time it takes to speak them, successive measures are likely to contain very different combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables—and even precisely timed rests. Thus there is a great variety created both by the material that fills each measure and by the succession of different types of measures. The material within the measures makes possible only seven different types of measure. But the various combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables, along with measure-initial and measure-final rests, produce about fifty different subtypes. The rich variety of these subtypes is the source of the complexity of the poet’s prosody.

What was, perhaps, of greatest use to the poet as he composed was the knowledge that many, though not all, of the subtypes manifest themselves as single words, compounds, and even short (measure-length) phrases. These words and phrases were the ready-made—and readily made—building blocks of the poet’s composition. So the poet did not have to rely on his ability to recall halfline or whole-line formulas—or even the few formulas that wrap around two lines. He had in mind what he needed: a prosody shaped by his lexicon, with which he could tell his story not only rapidly and with flexibility but even at times—often in this poem!—with virtuosity.

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## **Medieval Voices**

**Lori Ann Garner**

Among the many significant developments in oral tradition studies in recent years has been a growing awareness that the terms “oral” and “traditional” do not exclude influences of writing. Approaches viewing purely oral and purely literate modes of composition and reception as only the extreme ends of a continuum open up a wider range of works to us that are influenced to varying degrees by oral traditions (see, for example, Bradbury 1998). This broadening of scope allows for meaningful comparisons that transcend conventional boundaries of genre, language, and academic discipline.

Though we cannot witness medieval texts in their original performance contexts, genre approaches most often employed in folklore scholarship can still greatly enhance our understanding of many Old and Middle English texts. For instance, the basic categories of poetry and prose blur when looking at Old English charms as powerful components of healing rituals rather than as lines of verse on the printed page. A metrical charm against a wen demands that such a swelling decrease as water in a pail, a reference that becomes far more relevant when seen alongside a non-metrical charm that requires a young woman to empty pails of water as part of a wen-reducing ritual. The sometimes cryptic refrains employed in Middle English carols are also enhanced for us by viewing them in the context of their attendant dances and by increasing our awareness of traditional associations activated by their usage.

Language issues involved in medieval translation are also aided by this broader view of what constitutes oral tradition. The Old English scribes translated in the context of an oral tradition rather than through verbatim translation (see O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990; also Foley 1995 for a discussion of such “indexed translation”). For instance, the places where the Old English *Judith* deviates most noticeably from Jerome's Latin version are precisely the points that would have resonated the most strongly for an audience attuned to the Anglo-Saxon traditional register: Holofernes' dinner subverts many elements found in poetic depictions of Anglo-Saxon feasts, and the

implications of battle in Judith's slaying of Holofernes are heightened in keeping with the poetic register.

Productive comparisons can extend even beyond the realm of verbal arts to include such disciplines as archaeology and architecture. Wooden elements described in the Old English *Ruin*, for example, are architecturally out of place in this stone structure. The mood being evoked by the speaker, however, is one more often associated with the (wooden) Anglo-Saxon halls, making the image traditionally relevant though architecturally inconsistent.

Comparative approaches to living and textualized oral traditions can lead to meaningful and insightful readings of a wide range of performances and oral-derived texts (as is especially evident in the varied contents appearing within *Oral Tradition*). The multiple literary and traditional influences involved in the composition and reception of medieval texts require a plurality of approaches in analysis. Viewing "oral tradition" as the web of associations lying behind even highly literary works enables us to uncover traditionally encoded meanings across a broad spectrum of texts, bringing us at least somewhat closer to understanding these long-textualized medieval voices.

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## **Oral Traditional Approaches to Old English Verse**

**Heather Maring**

Since the publication of Francis P. Magoun's (1953) seminal article on the formula in Anglo-Saxon narrative verse, oral traditional approaches in the field of Old English have undergone a number of transitions, in the process growing more sophisticated and varied in technique and application. Early excitement over the aptness of Parry-Lord "formulas" and "themes" has evolved in definition and purpose: not being content with spotting a formula or theme for its own sake, scholars now interpret and evaluate the highly nuanced oral-aesthetic strategies embodied in the "traditional phraseology" and "type-scenes" of Old English verse (see Renoir 1988; Foley 1991). Early misguided attempts to pour Old English poetry into a mold generated by the study of Homeric and South Slavic poetics have given way to oral-formulaic technique rooted in the specifics of a Germanic language and its idiosyncratic prosody (see Foley 1990). Furthermore, heated debate over oral versus literate provenance has subsided in favor of a more modulated conception of an oral-literate continuum or, to use a slightly different image, of genre- and poem-specific meshings of oral Germanic and literate Latin-Christian rhetorical devices and subject matter (see Renoir 1988; O'Keeffe 1990). From the contemporary reader's viewpoint one result of these studies is that passages of poems that once seemed either confusing or pleasantly mysterious have grown in coherence and power: optimally, with the filter of oral traditional interpretation these texts seem to flip from a slightly warped 2-D image to a high-tech 3-D surround-sound experience.

In addition to oral-formulaic theory, Old English scholars are drawing upon such approaches as Reader-Response theory, Ethnography of Speaking, Ethnopoetics, Performance theory, and Immanent Art in search of ways to interpret and respect the aesthetic vitality of the extant corpus of verse (see, for instance, Howe 1993 and Doane 1994). Recently, John Miles Foley (2002) has called attention to the promising application of ethnopoetic approaches developed along different lines by Dennis Tedlock (1972) and Dell Hymes (1981). Ethnopoetics may be summarized as the textual

preservation of both words and the meaning-rich formal and paralinguistic features employed in the performance of a poem, whether that performance is live or has already been encoded in a literary medium. In a field such as Old English, where the only available “performances” must be reconstrued from vellum “scripts,” Hymes’ structural approach is more applicable. Drawing on ethnopoetics, oral-formulaic theory, and immanent art, Foley creates a modern-English structural translation of Beowulf’s opening lines, making apparent such aesthetically loaded features as half-lines, the prologue, an inset story, proverbs, and the sea voyage/ship burial scene. Hopefully this precedent will encourage similar attempts. Imagine the entire poetic corpus ethnopoetically reconfigured and retranslated to the best of our abilities! Such a project would no doubt graphically and acoustically wed many insights into the aesthetic resources being tapped by a poem’s manipulation of traditional patterns and foster further research and debates.

At minimum, two paths employing ethnopoetics are foreseeable: one would involve the creation of original-language editions referencing significant oral traditional cues, the other ethnopoetic translations into modern English. For example, a structural translation (or perhaps even better, structural translations) of the so-called “elegies” (*The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife’s Lament*, *Deor*, and others) would inevitably shed light on their unique synthesis of features from native Germanic genres and those derived from Christian-Latin influences.<sup>1</sup>

Due to confusion over issues such as genre, rhetorical purpose, number of speakers, and a poem’s “back-story,” the majority of the poems falling into the category of “elegy” have a wide variety of conflicting interpretations. Perhaps modern English translations foregrounding such oral-traditional strategies as riddling diction, proverbs, and the typical scenes of Exile, Beasts of Battle, and Joy in the Hall would not only contribute to richer and more cogent expositions, but also make more apparent the cognitive filters or interpretations that a specific scholar-translator applies to the Old English, whether at the micro-level of morphemes or at the macro-level of narrative. I can imagine, for starters, a collection of *Seafarer* poems ethnopoetically translated into modern English, each translation accompanied by its own justification. Any takers?

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough consideration of the Exeter Book elegies, see Klink’s 1992 edition.

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## Prizes from the Borderlands

John D. Niles

What is “the state of the art” as regards the study of literature and oral tradition? That question will have as many answers as there are people to respond. The point most worth making may be that though the battle was lost, the war has been won. By “the battle,” what I mean is the heroic attempt made by Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, and many other scholars during the mid-twentieth century to determine the mode of composition, whether oral or written, of the Homeric epics, *Beowulf*, and works of a similar character deriving from the ancient or medieval world. By “the war,” what I mean is the general effort to understand such works as examples of a kind of literary production that, while differing markedly from what most people in English departments are accustomed to thinking of as literature, has much in common with texts from various parts of the world that have been recorded through literate persons’ interventions into the ongoing practices of an oral tradition.

When texts of that latter kind are examined, they are often found to represent a kind of literature that has never existed before. They are hybrid texts whose character is deeply affected both by the normal practice of oral poetry and by the special conditions that are inherent in the process of collection and publication. The text may display all of the rhetorical features that are normally associated with oral composition, and it may be a showcase of modes of thought that are characteristic of a dominantly nonliterate mentality. In addition, however, the text may be longer than a record of a corresponding oral poem performed in an ordinary setting would ever be. Its narrative style may be more leisurely and its degree of ornamentation more elaborate. Some elements of a literate mentality (for example, a desire for architectural balance or inner consistency) may enter into the text as well. In short, such a text is a *tertium quid*: a new type of literature that has arisen as a kind of prize, displayed in the public arena after having been captured in the borderlands where literacy meets orality. It is that kind of orally derived poem that seems to provide the best analogy for

what we find when we read long, ornate, structurally coherent works like the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*.

The war that has been won by the oral theorists is therefore not quite the one that Parry, Lord, and their followers envisioned when they first set out into the field, but it is still one that has been worth winning. As a result of the work of many oral theorists—including, in recent years, such Anglo-Saxonists as Karl Reichl in his impressive fieldwork with Central Asian singers, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe in her studies of scribal practice, Andy Orchard in his analyses of Old English oratorical prose, and the editor of this journal in his many investigations into “word-power”—the map delineating the terrain on which literary studies take place is no longer the same as it was fifty years ago. The integrated study of orality and literacy shows great promise at the present time.

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## **Looking for an Echo: The Oral Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Literature**

**Andy Orchard**

William of Malmesbury, writing more than four centuries later, tells a tale of the Anglo-Saxon Aldhelm standing on a bridge in seventh-century Malmesbury, charming passers-by with his Old English verse. William also tells us that no less an aficionado of vernacular poetry than King Alfred the Great himself valued Aldhelm's Old English verse more highly than that of anyone else, even though two hundred years and more had passed since it was first performed. But not a scrap of Aldhelm's Old English verse can be identified of the roughly 30,000 lines that survive. Instead, we have more than 4,000 lines of Aldhelm's Latin poetry, composed in an idiosyncratically formulaic and alliterative style that appears to derive at least in part from the same native and ultimately oral tradition that produced *Beowulf*. The tale of Aldhelm's near-contemporary Cædmon is often cited as an example of oral poetry, but for all the scholarly wrangling over its significance, it is as well to remember that if vernacular verse was remembered and recited in monasteries (something Alcuin also complained about) then it largely survives through that connection: without Bede, we would know nothing of Cædmon, just as *Beowulf* only survives through its manuscript-association with four texts translated from Latin sources. With Bede, Aldhelm, Alfred, and Cædmon, we have all but exhausted the list of all the Old English poets whose names we know. And Cynewulf too, the most prolific named poet of all, actively sought to combine aspects of the vernacular oral and literate Latin traditions he inherited.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first application of what was termed "oral-formulaic" theory to Old English verse. Since then, the scholarly debate has thankfully moved beyond a rather sterile stand-off between those arguing that the formulaic phrasing of Old English poems such as *Beowulf* necessarily implied oral composition, and those noting similar levels of formulaic phrasing in other poems that unquestionably derived from literate, which is to say Latinate, models. Two articles by

Alexandra Hennessey Olsen in *Oral Tradition* 1 and 3 give a nuanced overview of developments in Anglo-Saxon scholarship up to 1988, and in the last decade and one-half the focus of research has widened considerably beyond Old English verse to consider the use of formulaic phrasing in Old English homiletic prose, Anglo-Latin poetry, and Anglo-Latin epistolary prose, as well as of themes and type-scenes shared with vernacular verse. In challenging the perceived binary opposition between literacy and orality in Anglo-Saxon literature, scholars have found themselves questioning assumptions about a whole set of similar binaries (verse/prose; Old English/Latin; pagan/Christian; native/imported; lay/learned) that characterize the extant texts. Proof of the potency of an inherited native pre-Christian poetic vernacular lay oral tradition is witnessed by the fact that several Christian Anglo-Saxons who chose to compose in Latin or in prose (or both) appear to have been influenced by vernacular verse at every level of composition: aside from formulaic phrasing, the presence of (for example) shared and characteristic patterns of alliteration, themes, and type-scenes are widespread.

The interdisciplinary work of scholars such as John Miles Foley has decisively moved the debate away from the mechanics of composition and into the area of individual artistry and intertextual influence, while the widespread use of machine-readable texts, computer-generated concordances, and electronic databases offers the modern critic an opportunity to examine Anglo-Saxon formulas at a level and intensity previously unimaginable. In providing the chance to analyze formulas by any combination of texts, authors, scribes, or manuscripts, my own ongoing “Anglo-Saxon Formulary” project will complement a number of other projects currently concentrating on the literary culture of Anglo-Saxon England. The Formulary will give comprehensive coverage of repeated formulas in four distinct areas of Anglo-Saxon literature from the seventh century to the eleventh, namely Old English verse, Anglo-Latin hexameter poetry, Wulfstan’s Old English sermons, and the Latin letters of Boniface and his circle. When complete, the database will offer a powerful tool for further research, promising to highlight new texts, new authors, and new techniques of composition in Anglo-Saxon literature, focusing attention back onto the interface between Latin and the vernacular, as well as providing a model for parallel endeavors in other related fields. During the past fifty years, oral theory has had a profound effect on the way Anglo-Saxon

literature is taught and perceived; students and scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature will be closely watching developments in oral theory in other fields as the next fifty years unfold.

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## *Pan-Asian*

Sabir Badalkhan on “Balochi Oral Tradition”

Mark Bender on “Oral Narrative Studies in China”

Naran Bilik on “Minority Oral Tradition in China”

Chan Park on “Korean *p’ansori* Narrative”

Olga Merck Davidson on “Classical Persian”

Karl Reichl on “Turkic Oral Epic”

Maria V. Stanyukovich on the Philippines

## **Balochi Oral Tradition**

**Sabir Badalkhan**

### **What is Oral Tradition?**

The oral tradition of the Baloch belongs to an ethnic group speaking a northwest Iranian language called Balochi and inhabiting Balochistan, a country now divided among Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. It was until recently—and to a great extent in many parts of the country it remains even now—a living art. It is, however, an art that is losing ground rapidly to the written word and to modern means of communication and entertainment.

A few decades back oral tradition was present in a Baloch's life from cradle to grave. It was so diffused, authoritative, and highly esteemed that among some Baloch tribes a newborn baby boy was presented with the recital of several heroic epics—either three or seven—by an old man in place of the call of prayers, *azan* (the proclamation of faith among Muslims saying that Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his only prophet), as is usually done in many other Muslim communities. A special session of epic recitation would be arranged and male elders of the family would be invited, animal(s) would be sacrificed, and a male elder of the family or someone else from the family or tribe would recite these epics for three to seven nights (Badalkhan 1992:38, n. 39). This was the first lesson the newborn boy would receive from the elders of his family, who expected him to behave accordingly and to follow in the footsteps of past Baloch heroes who left their legacy in historical epics with heroic deeds that safeguarded true Baloch values (*balochiat*). After that, the baby was sung lullabies by his mother, sisters, and maidservants until he grew old enough to be circumcised, wear trousers, enter the ranks of men, and assume all the obligations and duties that a man of the tribe had to manage. From then on, he was expected to participate in tribal warfare and other affairs of the tribe and to involve himself in cycles of revenge as necessary. Before that age he was considered a child and there was no consequence to any of his actions.

A boy's circumcision ceremony was in itself a great moment for his parents and family members, and also an event of even greater importance for his tribe in that a new man was entering their ranks and strengthening the tribal body. In such festivities, the whole tribe participated and often it was the tribal chief who sponsored the whole ceremony and covered all of the expenses. Famous minstrels would be invited by well-off families and local female singers would perform, accompanied by other women. Among poor families only the local female singer, usually the wife of the village blacksmith (Badalkhan 2000-01:163-64), would sing along with women of the village and the neighbourhood; no circumcision or wedding ceremony went without singing and music lest it be considered an ill omen for the boy and his family.

Similar oral traditional performances accompanied other life-cycle activities of the Baloch. Weddings were one recurring site for such activities. In some parts of Balochistan, especially in the north until recently, mourning, mostly of men but also of women if they belonged to an important family, included sung elegies, in some places accompanied by drums if it was the funeral of a tribal chief. Although the birth of a girl was not celebrated except in those families with no child at all or in the upper-class families, a daughter's wedding was celebrated by her family with much singing and dancing, as well as animal sacrifices.

Oral tradition has been very important for the Baloch as an ethnolinguistic group. It served them as their history when there was no written history in their language. It was also the record of their cultural values, a mark of their identity, a guideline for the younger generation, and a check on their behavior and way of conduct. Oral tradition also "flavors" assemblies via tale-telling, the recital of poems, and the quoting of proverbs or excerpts from past poets; in this way various speech-acts are strengthened and opinions can be authenticated. There can be no dispute about the wisdom of the past. Reciting poems or inserting proverbs in discourse also demonstrates that the speaker is well versed in the Baloch traditions, serving as a kind of presentation card certifying the speaker as a true Baloch (*asli Baloch*).

While verse narratives (*sheyr*) and their composers (*shair*) certainly held a high place in Baloch society, other genres of verbal art did not occupy a lesser position in regard to daily life. For example, people with a talent for reciting proverbs in discussions always have a prominent place in men's gatherings. Similarly, proverbs are equally popular among women, and in some areas women quote more proverbs than their menfolk do. Riddle competition is also highly valued since it is considered to be an important test of a person's wittiness. When sitting or walking in a group, it is not

unusual for a person to observe something, put it in riddle form, and ask others to see whether they can guess the meaning.

Oral tradition has also served as a pastime during long winter nights. During this period people spent a considerable part of the night gathered at a chief's guesthouse or visiting neighbors or the village blacksmith to listen to tales and legends or to compete with each other in posing riddles. Each village has a blacksmith, who in addition to being a craftsman also plays music and tells tales on festive occasions. Although they belonged to the lower strata of Balochi society and had no or little social position in a traditionally hierarchical organization, blacksmiths' mastery of the verbal art always secured them a central place at public gatherings during leisure times or when someone was needed to entertain the assembly. They were in the service of the people, and people provided them with a livelihood by bestowing special gifts on festive occasions as well as at harvests.

To sum up, we can say without hesitation that Balochs have a very rich oral tradition that includes poems and songs to celebrate or commemorate many events. But although they boast one of the richest song genres in the region (see Badalkhan 1994:ch. 3), it remains the least studied so far.

### **The most interesting new directions in Balochi oral tradition studies**

The first fieldwork on Balochi oral tradition stems from the nineteenth century, when the British came in contact with Baloch tribes and felt the need to study the local language to be able to communicate. British missionaries and administrators concentrated mainly on the collection of samples of Balochi oral poetry, but some also gathered folktales and other genres such as riddles, proverbs, and so forth. The most important collection was that done by Longworth Dames, chiefly on the Dera Ghazi Khan district of southwestern Punjab. His *Popular Poetry of the Baloches*, published in London in two volumes in 1907 (vol. 1 is the English translation of the Balochi texts given in vol. 2) was a landmark in the study of indigenous oral tradition and a great stimulus for Baloch men of letters during the second half of the twentieth century (see Badalkhan 1992). It was the only such work that contained an introductory note dealing with the sources, origin, and character of Balochi poetry, with material on classification, forms of verse, methods of singing, the antiquity of heroic poems, and so on; the second volume contains an account of the language of Balochi poetry. But after the publication of this important collection no work of any scale was carried out until the withdrawal of the British from the Indian subcontinent

and the emergence of Pakistan in the second half of the twentieth century. Balochistan, with its capital at Kalat, declared its independence and survived as a separate country until late March, 1948, when the Pakistan Army moved to Kalat and forced the ruler to sign a document of accession.

In 1949 Radio Pakistan's Karachi station began broadcasting in regional languages. The new 45-minute programs in Balochi were a development that encouraged the Baloch literate class to write in their own language and to collect material from the rich oral tradition of their people. But such collections resulted only in sporadic publications of a poem here and there in a Balochi journal; since the language was not taught in schools and had no official sponsorship, attempts to publish in Balochi were viewed with suspicion by the central government. Indeed, Balochi publications were severely limited and came under constant censorship. As a result, the oral tradition is still largely unrecorded, and Balochs themselves still consider their oral literature as having no value. I remember once talking to a native compiler of a volume on Balochi folktales who recounted once making a collection and presenting the manuscript to the chairman of the Balochi Academy. He told me that the Academy chairman, who himself was a famous writer, had shouted at him, berating him for undertaking such a useless project. "This was the last time that I made any attempt to collect folktales," he told me in an interview in Quetta in 2000 (oral communication with Surat Khan Mari).

One can say without hesitation that oral tradition is now a dying art in Balochistan. Notwithstanding the emergence of a strong nationalistic feeling among the Baloch population both in Iran and Pakistan, the existence of *pahlawan* (professional singers of verse narratives), and the love for *suroz* (a bowed instrument played as an accompaniment to narrative songs and considered to be the national instrument of the Baloch) among the educated classes, there seems to be no future for the oral tradition in Balochistan. Times are changing rapidly and it is unlikely that Balochi oral traditions, such as minstrelsy and storytelling sessions, can survive even a couple of decades from now. Worst of all is the fact that many of these forms have not been collected and preserved at all. If the bearers of this centuries-old, highly refined art die, we will have very little material in hand on which to base a description and study of the Balochi oral tradition.

For example, about 30 years back when I was in elementary school the children of our village spent every moonlit night in outdoor games (every village had a playground for such purposes), while dark nights were devoted to telling tales to each other or organizing riddle competitions. Winter nights, on the other hand, were ideal for storytelling sessions and indoor games such as riddle competitions, where children were sometimes

also joined by elders, both men and women. There were also additional indoor games that involved rhymes and songs. On other occasions, people of the village, including children and adults of both sexes, gathered at the house of an aged man or woman or at the house of the village *ludi* (professional blacksmith but also musician, singer, storyteller, handicraftsman, circumciser; see Badalkhan 2000-01:163-64). Very often, boys from farming families would collect wood for fuel while those from wealthier families would bring sugar, tea, and the like for the storyteller and her/his audience. These homes would function as storytelling institutions where long winter nights became “short” and tales remained “long,” as one of the formulae in Balochi storytelling puts it (Badalkhan 2000-01:171). Frequently, someone from among the audience would also come up and tell tales. Very rare was the night with no storytelling or indoor games.

Other factors were operative as well. Since the people of the village were in the majority of cases related to each other by blood, there was no concept of refusing the favor of telling tales to each other. The case was the same with the *ludi*, who was economically dependent on the village community and so had a professional duty to entertain the village people with his tales whenever they gathered at his place or called him to some other place. The Muslim fasting month of Ramazan was another occasion for such regular sessions; people kept the fast for 30 days from sunrise to sunset, with many nights spent awake from dinner up to the last meal at around 5 a.m. These were occasions when people were kept busy by storytellers, either professionals or amateurs, and the repertoires of these storytellers were so rich that they never came to an end.

In the past, itinerant minstrels would also visit regularly after every harvest or during religious festivals; they were frequently invited for wedding and circumcision ceremonies or upon the birth of sons of important families. During their seasonal tours these minstrels would visit all of the villages on their route. One was followed by another, and this sequence would continue for weeks, keeping the people’s interest fresh and their attachment to the tradition alive. But now, alas, people of all ages and of both sexes are stuck to television sets, sometimes spending every bit of their free time there. There are numerous satellite television networks, and local distributors have made them accessible even to families with minimum earnings. Since television is a new phenomenon, people are lost in it and have abandoned interest in all other types of traditional entertainments and engagements. And since these networks mostly telecast their programs in Hindi, which when spoken is very similar to Urdu, people have no difficulty in understanding them. Indeed, even when people do not understand the language, they enjoy these performances and are entertained.

Balochi verbal art and musical traditions have also suffered a severe setback from the constantly rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. This influence started soon after the Communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978, followed by the holy war of the West against the Soviets in Afghanistan using the card of Islam; all reactionary Arab regimes joined the West in this war. As a result, Islamic fundamentalism has made gains throughout the area and Balochistan has been no exception. In many places where Islamic fundamentalist parties have established roots, singing and playing music have been prohibited and replaced by religious sermons. Even clapping hands has been declared un-Islamic and replaced by chanting “Allah o Akbar” (“Allah is Great”), following the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Balochi oral tradition needs the urgent attention of folklore scholars. We must collect as much material as possible because time is running out very fast. The most urgent necessity is to interview living minstrels and record their repertoires, for all of them have reached an advanced age and no new minstrels have emerged for decades. The simple reason is that the social, cultural, and economic situation in Balochistan has undergone drastic change, and under the new circumstances this centuries-old art has not found any place. People in modern times lack both the interest and the time to listen to and appreciate these long narrative songs, which sometimes require many nights to be sung fully. Other types of verbal art also need the attention of folklore scholars. Balochi is very rich in folktales, riddles, simple proverbs and anecdotal proverbs, songs related to the life cycle (the birth of a child, e.g.), lullabies, cradle songs, praise songs to babies, circumcision and wedding songs, elegies, play songs, work songs, songs of nostalgia and longing, and so on. All this needs our immediate attention lest we lose this rich material forever.

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## **Oral Narrative Studies in China**

**Mark Bender**

Oral narratives fall into two broad classifications in China. The first is “folk literature,” and the second is urban-based narratives performed by professional or avocational performers.

The field of study focusing on oral literature (*koutou wenxue*) is concerned with traditional genres that tend to be lumped under rather general though not necessarily descriptive headings such as folktale, myth, legend, children’s stories, animal tales, narrative poems, epics, and so forth. These categories, introduced into China from the West (to some extent via Japan) by the early twentieth century and modified to suit Chinese needs by scholars such as the late Zhong Jingwen, are still the basis of the text-based approach to oral literature followed by most scholars and cultural workers in China today. It is assumed that most of these forms of narrative (as well as folksongs) exist and are collected among rural people. In recent decades, massive folklore collecting projects have resulted in the anthologizing of a huge number of texts (rather highly censored in the early decades after 1949) in a wide variety of venues, including newspapers, magazines, journals, books, and book series. At times some were used to promote political agendas and many texts have found their way into a variety of popular media. Moreover, a large number of works have been published as “inner-circulating” documents for scholars only since 1949. In recent years, as strictures have relaxed, most scholars prefer the public forums.

Though the bulk of published materials are “text-based” (sometimes with little or no description of the performance process and context), in recent years a small number of younger, well-positioned Chinese scholars have turned a critical eye to developments in folklore studies in Europe and the United States and have begun experimenting with a bundle of approaches that, if considered from a distance, might be called the “oral pragmatics” school of Western folklore/folk narrative studies. The body of theory constituting this syncretizing approach (which seems pragmatic both in the sense of descriptive methodology and ethnopoetic politics) wields a theoretical tool-kit that includes Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory, a

performance/contextual/ethnography of communication approach, Lauri Honko's ideas on the "folklore process" and the "process of textualization," reception aesthetics, John Miles Foley's ideas on "traditional referentiality" (and his syncretic approach), and research on the psychophysical implications of performance.

Among the most active of the younger Chinese scholars and editors is Chao Gejin, a scholar of the Mongol ethnic nationality in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His groundbreaking work on the oral poetics of Mongol epic singing (2000) is the first full-length study of an ethnic minority tradition in China to fully utilize aspects of many of the approaches just listed, introducing translations and explanations of key terms in the text. Major folklore journals in China have in recent years also included translations of what they perceive as key works of Western folklore studies, including a number of key chapters on basic approaches translated from Foley's *Teaching Oral Traditions* (1998). Other innovative voices include those in the productive Bamo Sisters' Studio, a small group of Yi nationality sisters (including Bamo Ayi and Bamo Qubumo) who have helped bring an international profile to the large Yi nationality in southwest China through their studies on oral and written poetic narrative, ritual specialist texts, a recent museum exhibit on material culture at the University of Washington, and a Harvard conference in 2001. The situation of Yi folk narrative studies is exceptional, however, as many groups have a low profile within as well as outside of China and funding for local research organs is inconsistent nationwide. It will be interesting to see where this oral pragmatics approach goes in China, given the large number of local oral traditions still available for study, despite the increasing waves of modernization.

Another large body of oral or oral-connected narrative also exists in China, though its items tend to be classified as "performing narrative arts" (*quyi*) or, when written, as forms of "vernacular literature" (*suwenxue*). These narrative arts, many of which were prosimetric in form and had a musical dimension, numbered over 300 at the end of the nineteenth century. They were (or are) performed in urban and small-town venues (markets, teahouses, or in some places actual "story houses") and in some instances today on radio and television. Some of these traditions have strong dramatic elements, and while most are secular, a few are performed in ritual contexts. Themes (martial or love-related) and stories are often those shared with traditional Chinese opera. These arts have been understudied by Chinese scholars (who until recently often regarded them as low-brow entertainment), with notable works often produced by researchers in local government culture bureaus such as Wu Zongxi (Zuo Xian) in Shanghai and Zhou Liang in Suzhou, who research Suzhou *pingtan* storytelling (Bender

2003). Interest by foreign scholars such as Vibeke Børdahl, who has published extensively on Yangzhou professional storytelling, has helped to stimulate interest in these arts, many of which are in decline due to lack of young performers and audiences.

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## **Minority Oral Tradition in China**

**Naran Bilik**

Non-textual, performative oral traditions oustrip written texts in terms of kinesics, expression, intonation, situation, and so forth, all of which dimensions convey metaphors that contain a wealth of intuition. It takes a special form of mnemonics, integrated into the narrator's performances, to strengthen, re-present, and reconstruct local memories. Oral history relies on performativity for inheritance and representation, and the performance of oral history is the transformation of three-dimensional social memory. Such a medium has no gender bias; both men and women can perform and listen to it. Oral history rejects linguistic hegemony and can be performed in various languages, with its audience coming from either the nobility or the "untouchables."

In a "digitalized" or "digitalizing" world, oral traditions provide us with strong moral support via the sense or experience of bodily presence that we start to enjoy with our parents the moment we are born into the world. Oral traditions are one of the major sources for identity formation, giving group members moral comfort and a feeling of unity. No complete, healthy personality can be cultivated for a man or a woman in a society if he or she is denied access to oral traditions while such traditions are available. More plurality and diversity are allowed for oral traditions than for digital technology. Such differences are especially meaningful for a nation-building China that embraces more and more homogeneity and tolerates less and less heterogeneity in terms of culture and language.

In addition, oral traditions can overstep the boundary between "idealism" and "materialism" by incorporation of both: corporeal skill and mental wisdom are always integrated into habitus or "doxa," as Bourdieu would put it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Habitus: as defined by Bourdieu (1990), a culturally specific way not only of doing and speaking, but also of seeing, thinking, and categorizing. Habitus tends to be "naturalized" in that it is taken for granted or assimilated into the unconscious, so that habitus is a necessary condition of action and shared understanding.

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## Korean *p'ansori* Narrative

Chan Park

### What is oral tradition?

Oral tradition is a living community. Distanced from the languages, tales, and populates of today, oral tradition is habitually dissociated from the narrative behaviors of the present. Oral tradition may seem fixed and encased in the past, but it too evolves with time. From a strawmat birth to a national treasure, *p'ansori*, a Korean storysinging tradition, has continually crossed regions, styles, schools, languages, genders, genres, social classes, modes of transmission and presentation, and performance contexts. Emerging from regional shaman ritual chant, *p'ansori* narrative became injected with Confucian ethics and literary calibers in the nineteenth century, designated as an Intangible Cultural Treasure in the twentieth century, and continues to inform the Korean narrative past.

The text of oral tradition is the voice that sings. Compared with second-language pedagogy targeting languages existing today, oral tradition focuses on sociolinguistic life long obsolete but essential to interpreting epic's inner dimensions less visible to a modern eye. In *p'ansori*, the voice that narrates is more than a message-bearer. It is the very text of the tradition that takes total commitment from the learner. Perpetuating a quaint story-singing tradition against the tide of modernity is challenging to say the least, and *p'ansori* thrives much less on improvisation or new composition than on the confirmation of its past. Still, its performance is a reconstruction of not merely the past, but the continuing past. In the process of unquestioning emulation emerges an individual voice expressive simultaneously of the tradition and of the performer's own interpretive aesthetics. In sum, *p'ansori* as an oral tradition is the entire process of its tradition-making, tradition-bearing, and tradition-reenacting: emergence, proliferation, preservation, valorization, pedagogy, acquisition, adaptation, and performance here and now.

### Future directions

Today, audiovisual technology helps preserve *p'ansori* for future reference, while *p'ansori* discourses themselves habitually deviate from their oral existence as researchers ignore or invalidate indigenous voices in favor of scientifically situated secondary voices. The ultimate challenge is conceptualizing the acoustic depths of orality. Due to the experiential nature of the understanding of performance, the true shape and size of the oral tradition may not be fully fathomed, even if graced with the most reliable testimonies by insiders, unless seen from inside the tradition. In order to understand the nature of oral tradition, one must first enter its performative world as a humble student. Outside the *p'ansori* designated as “archetypes,” efforts to tune its narrative structure to the stories of the present need to be amplified. From another angle, actual performances of oral traditions have yet to cross cultural and linguistic barriers. Due to its nonverbal modes of communication, dance or instrumental art freely crosses regional and national boundaries, but it is difficult for oral tradition to do so on account of its language-dependency, as well as the necessity for communication between the performer and the audience. Insofar as oral tradition is a narrative event, its study should rightfully include discovery or invention of cross-cultural or cross-linguistic narrativity beyond the customary use of subtitles or adaptation.

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## Classical Persian

Olga Merck Davidson

The study of oral traditional elements in Classical Persian poetry was recognized by Albert Lord (1986:476). The monumental poem known as the *Shâhnâma* of Ferdowsi is a case in point. Its poetic diction reveals a system of phraseology that approximates Lord's definition of the formula in oral tradition studies (Davidson 1988). To the extent that formulaic structure is a basic feature of oral traditional poetry (Lord 1960), the diction of the *Shâhnâma* provides conclusive evidence for the oral traditional poetic background of this poem.

In the study of Classical Persian poetry, the concept of oral tradition is problematic for those who assume that "orality" and "literacy" were incompatible in medieval Persian civilization (see Davidson 2000 for a survey of the ongoing debates). But recent work on oral traditions has made it clear that the essence of oral poetry does not depend on the absence of writing. In his later works, especially in *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (1991) and *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (1995), Lord showed that there exist patterns of coexistence and even compatibility between literacy and oral poetry in various poetic traditions. Lord's focus was on medieval Western European traditions, but there are striking parallels in Persian medieval traditions (Davidson 2000).

Perhaps the most dramatic parallel is the conceptualization of oral performance in terms of a written book. The Persian *Shâhnâma*, which in fact means "Book of Kings," is not only an actual book that records the composition of the master poet Ferdowsi; it presents itself as a figurative performance, describing itself simultaneously as an ongoing performance and as a book waiting to be activated in performance. So also in medieval French and English traditions, among others, the concept of the book is linked not only to the recording of performance but also to the performance itself (Davidson 1994).

An essential feature of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma* is its performativity, which is expressed by the poetry itself in its various references to the authoritative performance of its stories by performers conventionally

described as wise men who know by heart the traditions of the poetry that conveys the essence of their civilization.

A most interesting new direction in oral tradition studies as applied to Classical Persian poetry has to do with the testimony of the prose texts that serve as prefaces to the manuscript versions of the *Shâhnâma*. These “prose prefaces” are mythologized or quasi-mythologized accounts of the poet’s life and times (Davis 1998). Such myths, however, are also a matter of history. They provide evidence for the historical contexts in which the actual performance traditions of the *Shâhnâma* took shape; they are in effect aetiologies of the oral traditions that became recorded in the Book of Kings (Davidson 2001).

A source for electronic publications on oral tradition studies as applied to Classical Persian poetry and to Near Eastern and Mediterranean studies in general is <http://ilexfoundation.org/public/index.html>.

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## Turkic Oral Epic

Karl Reichl

What is oral poetry? When Socrates asks Laches what courage is, he gets as a first answer that courage is when someone bravely fights against the enemy without taking flight. Socrates is not pleased with this answer, because he wants to get to the essence of virtue rather than discuss examples of virtuous behavior. So, what is oral poetry? Like Laches I will have to answer by giving examples rather than getting to the essence.

Oral poetry in my field—which I take to be that of Turkic oral epic (rather than medieval “oral” epic, although it is as a professor of medieval English that I earn my living)—is first and foremost when a professional singer performs narrative poetry (together with some other well-defined types of poetry) to an audience. A professional singer? Maybe one should say a professional traditional singer, that is, a singer who has acquired his repertoire in the traditional way, by “studying” with a master singer rather than at a music academy. But here already we run into all kinds of difficulties (Socrates would have his fun): sometimes singers have not had the benefit of staying with master singers and learning from them, sometimes they have had additional or simply different ways of acquiring a repertoire (by hearing books/manuscripts read to them or reading them themselves; by listening to taped performances; even—yes, *contradictio definitionis!*—by studying at a music academy). Sometimes singers cannot be professionals because there is no market for their goods anymore, and sometimes a tradition is moribund and only the amateur carries it on. But the prototypical epic singer, as it were, does exist and is still very much a reality in some traditions: the Kirghiz bard (probably the strongest tradition), the Uzbek *bakhshi* (in particular in the south of Uzbekistan), the Karakalpak *zhynrau* (about to die out), the Kazakh *aqyn* (mostly in Xinjiang, China), and others.

And how oral is “oral” in these cases? Again, the prototypical case is that of the singer learning orally an epic that exists only in oral form and is orally performed by singer-generation after singer-generation. This is, of course, an idealized picture, idealized for the twenty-first century, but also

for the twentieth century. It is true that compared to Europe the folklore of Central Asia has been only fragmentarily recorded, and recording started seriously only in the thirties of the last century (with some exceptions like Radloff in the nineteenth century). Yet literacy as well as books have been around for some time, and in some traditions (like the Uzbek tradition of Khorezm) the written word has never been spurned by singers. Nonetheless, all things considered, I would say that “oral” in the case of Turkic epic means orally composed, orally transmitted, and orally performed.

What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies in my field? I think one new direction is simply the greater awareness among native scholars in Central Asia of western scholarship. This new awareness might lead to better and fuller documentation and eventually to new interpretations of their material. However, this development is still in its infancy. If I had to single out a recent publication in my field (with a catholic definition of “field” by incorporating the Indian subcontinent), I would mention the late Lauri Honko’s edition and translation of the Siri epic of southern India (Honko et al. 1998, Honko 1998). This is a publication that is based on meticulously documented material; it has an extensive and in many ways ground-breaking theoretically oriented introduction (of particular note is the idea of a “mental text”); and it is exemplary in combining western scholarship with the expertise of native scholars.

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## **A Living Shamanistic Oral Tradition: Ifugao *hudhud*, the Philippines**

**Maria V. Stanyukovich**

The most ancient genres of oral literature date back to the time when one ritual specialist performed the functions of epic singer, shaman, and priest. Once studied in Siberia and Central Asia, these ancient forms are better preserved nowadays in insular Southeast Asia (Stanyukovich forthcoming).

The Ifugao *hudhud* oral tradition, which I have been studying for the last two decades, is the core of ritual and ideology among highlanders of Northern Luzon, Philippines. The Ifugao are wet-rice cultivators who until the early twentieth century practiced headhunting, preserving their traditional society with no political and very loose territorial organization.

The *hudhud* meets all the standards typical of heroic epic patterns, including plot structure and formulaic style (Stanyukovich 1983). At the same time it is a highly archaic combination of heroic epics and shamanistic narratives. The *hudhud* characters are regarded as ancestors and incorporated into the male pantheon as part of the Hulupe class of benevolent deities.

The female ideology that looks so much out-of-place in the genre of the heroic epic is another striking characteristic of the *hudhud*. It emerges that while male epic concentrates on violence, expressed through a system of headhunting based on rage, enmity, and vengeance, female epic concentrates on the problem of peacemaking and represents a tradition of heroic exploits in which no blood whatsoever is spilled. After a series of battles during which no one is either killed or wounded, the principal *hudhud* characters exchange sisters and celebrate a double marriage. That means a total elimination of enmity: the next generation will have no enemies (Stanyukovich 2000).

The most urgent study in regard to *hudhud* is the comparison of three genres of Ifugao folklore. The first is “pure” heroic epic. The second is *hudhud di nate* (“funeral song / song of the dead”), which I was lucky to find

and record in the areas south of Kiangan. It is a shamanistic song performed in the same manner as epic, “pushing” the soul toward the abode of the dead. Before it reaches the underworld, the souls of one or two relatives who participate in the chant are sent to catch up with it. They are endowed with *qawil*—gifts of the souls of rice, pigs, and chickens (the underworld being the source of fertility)—by the deceased. The moment when they meet is marked by the possession. The chant uses the epic melody and formulaic language, the deceased being named by the appropriate epic hero’s name (Stanyukovich 1998). The third genre is that of non-epic funeral chants spread outside the *hudhud* area of Ifugao.

The most interesting directions in oral tradition studies of the Philippines are found in the works of Nicole Revel. Among them are the notion of “multiple drafts” in epic performance (1996) and the study of environmental knowledge as expressed in oral tradition, or “flowers of speech” (1990-92), inspired by the path-breaking works of Harold C. Conklin. Revel’s holistic approach, based on thirty years of field studies of the Palawan epics, has resulted in stereoscopic vision of oral tradition and the society that produced it.

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## *Comparative*

Robert Cochran on Performing Off Stage

Thomas A. DuBois on “Oral Tradition”

Edward R. Haymes on Medieval German Poetry

Joshua T. Katz on “Oral Tradition in Linguistics”

Della Pollock on “Oral Traditions in Performance”

Burton Raffel on “Poetics and Translation Studies”

William Schneider on Native American Narratives

## **Performing Off Stage: Oral Tradition Under the Radar**

**Robert Cochran**

Oral tradition for me has been playground basketball, music, jokes, and a party organized by a cohort of janitors for their retiring boss.<sup>1</sup> Jokes, games, and music as aspects of oral tradition will surprise no one, so I'll use the party for my stab at "interesting new directions." Here's what happened: over a period of several weeks a group of seven custodians designed and then (on June 30, 1983) successfully pulled off a surprise retirement party for their supervisor. The party itself developed into a complex event—though it started as a straightforward plan to "get him something." The final version featured a "big one" or straight gift with an engraved message, a "gag" gift with its own jocular (obscene) message, a decorated cake with yet another message, a "gag" wrapping of the straight gift in a series of nested boxes, presentation of this gift by three "bathing beauties" (coeds in swimsuits), an appearance by the honoree's own supervisor, and a series of snapshots providing a record of the occasion.

From the beginning I was most intrigued by the shape of the party—I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, but I'm now convinced that the competence shared among its designers is usefully comprehended as an instance of oral tradition. They knew, for example, without reference to etiquette books or professional party consultants, that "everybody" gave watches to people when they retired. (I asked all seven about this, one at a time, in terms verging upon sarcasm: "Why hand him a watch, when the whole point of retiring is you don't need to worry about what time it is anymore?" Again and again I got the same answer, in terms verging upon incredulity—"everybody" did it. Surely I knew that.)

I did. And surely this is oral tradition in operation, no matter the absence of ascertainable textual precepts. The party's every feature originated as one man's idea and survived by not violating six others' notions of appropriate festivity. Generalizing from this instance, I would

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<sup>1</sup> For more on playground basketball, see Cochran 1976; for music, Cochran 1999; for jokes, Cochran 1989; for the custodians' retirement party, Cochran 1992.

hope for more studies focused upon the utilization of various codes/lores/repertoires by “tradition bearers” who possess them and are in turn formed by them. It’s been long understood that folks don’t just lug their culture around. They use it—knowingly, creatively, most of all interestedly (even selfishly)—to shape their behavior. They even exploit it to shape themselves, for better or worse.

Two examples from one Arkansas family: a young man exhibits a special liking for “badman” songs like “Rovin’ Gambler” and “Bad Companions” and goes on to a life of spectacular restlessness and domestic turmoil. His Arkansas sisters know several slavery songs; one loves “Massa’s In De Cold Ground,” with its idealization of plantation life, while the other loves “Nellie Gray,” with its sympathy for a Kentucky wife kidnapped into slavery in Georgia. The first becomes a fan of Governor Faubus; the second despises him. I’m convinced both were guided in their thinking by their songs. Does it go too far to suggest that the second’s ballots against Faubus constitute off-stage performances of “Nellie Gray”? I’d love to hear more of these stories.

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## **Oral Tradition**

**Thomas A. DuBois**

My current research focuses on the interpretive traditions behind lyric songs in Northern Europe. In my understanding, oral tradition refers on the one hand to concrete players and objects observable in an oral performance and, on the other hand, to a murky yet essential body of knowledge that underlies every aspect of the performance as created, enacted, and interpreted. The concrete elements of this ethnographic whole—the performer, the audience, a transcribed or recorded performance (the “text”)—offer insights into how oral tradition operates in the here-and-now. The murky body of knowledge (“tradition”) includes norms about the form the performance will take (its genre), the time and place it will unfold in (its context), the person(s) who will perform, the person(s) who will listen, the ways in which the listeners will respond, and the ways in which the performer(s) will incorporate the present experience into future performances. Tradition as such is large and shadowy, subject to constant negotiation. Yet by attending to the traces left in the concrete elements of the oral performance, it is possible to gain a sense of tradition and its workings.

Regarding the concrete elements of the performance, we may note that past scholars have devoted great attention to the text, somewhat less to the performer, and little at all to the audience. For this reason, the audience holds great potential for enriching our understandings of tradition. Part of understanding the audience comes in understanding the competence expected of it. That competence lies first in recognizing the genre in which a performance occurs (Seitel 1999), and then in appraising the ways in which the performer has used generic resources to (dis)advantage in the present performance (Foley 2002). In some genres, as Ochs et al. (1996) show, the role of “audience” may in fact become tantamount to “co-narrator.” Careful ethnographic studies of performances in the here-and-now are essential for building up scholarly understandings of the audience and its roles, yet performances recorded long ago can also prove enlightening, if we attend to the traces left in the text. Too often, complexity

of texts has been regarded as a sign of the value of the text alone, or of the skills of the performer, but has not been appreciated as a sign of the considerable skills expected of the audience.

As we examine the “traditional” audience, we must also take stock of the interventive figures often responsible for the existence of the texts we study. These may be authors or scribes of the past, collector/editors of the nineteenth century, or ethnographic fieldworkers of the present day. In every case, such figures affect the performances they observe, sometimes to a startling degree, as Mills (1991) has shown in her study of her own fieldwork in Afghanistan. Kuutma (2002) demonstrates how such effects can be recognized in texts recorded in the past, in this case in ethnographic works of the early twentieth century. The fieldworker is never truly “invisible,” even when he or she is a member of the community studied: as Nyberg et al. (2000) point out, thorny issues of influence affect the “insider” as well as the “outsider” collector. These influences have too often been minimized in earlier studies; they need to be examined and appreciated as aspects of the audience role in performance.

If scholars of oral tradition attend to theorizing audience with the diligence and stamina that they have devoted to texts and performers, it is certain that a profound and valuable understanding of the audience as a concrete element of performances will emerge. And with it, we will come one step closer to understanding the rich complexity of oral tradition.

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## Oral Theory and Medieval German Poetry

Edward R. Haymes

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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## **Oral Tradition in Linguistics**

**Joshua T. Katz**

Historical linguists and Indo-Europeanists are not known for their attention to Oral Tradition. Nevertheless, oral tradition—with lowercase letters—plays a critical role in linguistic scholarship, one so basic, indeed, that it is rarely acknowledged as such. In order to understand how this is so, let us examine the two words “oral” and “tradition.”

“Oral” means “pertaining to the mouth” or, when it comes to language, “communicated by mouth/through speech”; the sense in which scholars like John Miles Foley generally use it is an extension of the latter definition, namely “performed by mouth/through speech,” where “performed” refers to a special kind of communication. What is important to understand is that every linguist is an oralist: language exists in the first place for the purpose of communication, and the most basic form of this communication is through a medium other than writing, which for everything other than sign language is via the mouth. And every historical linguist is an oralist, too, for the additional reason that it is possible to look at language across time only because parents naturally speak in their own most familiar tongue with their children, generation after generation. As for “tradition,” this refers to “that which is passed down,” and so it is obvious that every historical linguist is a traditionalist as well as an oralist: the study of linguistic change depends on the fact that communication proceeds naturally from one generation to the next, over and over again. In short, then, even a historical linguist who is not interested in, say, the oral nature of Homeric epic is fundamentally indebted to oral tradition.

Some of the most interesting recent work in Indo-European studies looks at not just “normal” language, which is the usual object of most linguistic research, but also forms of speech, like poetry, that are delivered in an exceptional context. For at least 150 years, scholars have noted the existence of cognate poetic phrases in two or more Indo-European traditions, with pride of place usually going to a passing comment by Adalbert Kuhn in 1853 on “imperishable fame” in the Greek *Iliad* and the Sanskrit *Rigveda*, both major works of traditional oral poetry. However, proper appreciation

of the artful employment of language and of larger poetic structures (not just words and phrases, but type-scenes and themes) has been slower in coming. In the past couple of decades, the most influential figure in the field has been Calvert Watkins, whose 1995 book is already a classic. The next meeting of the Indogermanische Gesellschaft, the leading international professional society of Indo-Europeanists, will be taking place in Paris in October 2003, and the theme is “Indogermanische Dichtersprache”: happily, the study of historical poetics, and with it, o/Oral t/Tradition, is on the rise.

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## Oral Traditions in Performance

Della Pollock

When I arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1986 to teach Performance Studies in the Department of Communication Studies, I found I was to teach a relatively new course on “Oral Traditions.” The course I inherited was constructed as a Western history of oral performance, beginning with the classical rhapsode, moving through medieval minstrelsy, turn-of-the-century elocutionary traditions, rising to the American progressivist Chatauqua circuit and modern studies of literature in performance.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the course served both as an introduction to types and practices of “high” orality and as a history of one current in the field, establishing what until relatively recently had been “Oral Interpretation” as a classical correlate of drama and rhetoric.

In the mid-eighties (some will say earlier) the field exploded, in part leading, in part following the “performative turn” across disciplines.<sup>2</sup> As the humanities and social sciences absorbed the deconstruction of the “text,” and the revered object of literary study began to dissolve into processes of production and reception, Interpretation became Performance Studies, signaling above all the expansion of “performance” to include heretofore “low” forms of oral performance (performance in everyday life, personal and life narrative performance, rites of conservation and resistance) as well as large-scale processes of social change and identity formation. The literary met the anthropological; the text collapsed into context—and a fury of debates over the nature, status, and value of performance ensued.

My course changed. I clung to the chronological model for a while, expanding it to include non-Western traditions. But over the years, I have felt more and more compelled to engage students in a *performative*

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<sup>1</sup> For a powerful account of the modern history of Performance Studies, see Edwards 1999. On contemporary developments, see Strine et al. 1990 and, e.g., Phelan and Lane 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Conquergood 1989 and 1991.

*epistemology*: a mode of knowing by doing and feeling the sensuous, concrete, vital, risky, relational, and highly contingent claims of live performance. I have also, like many of my colleagues in the field and across the disciplines, felt the upwash of digital communication: the orality/literacy dichotomy—for all of its faults—had been a useful trope for highlighting the distinctiveness of nonliterate communication; and yet it seems to have less and less traction. The students don't relate.

In my own work, moreover, building on another current in the field, I have been primarily concerned with the power of performances embedded in dialogic social relations.<sup>3</sup> The key question for me has consequently become less what does a particular performance do or accomplish in a given context than what do the participants in that context do or accomplish through mutually composed and multi-layered performances? The performance is a co-creative event. As such, it at once embodies and makes change.

In the course, this has meant, among other things, emphasizing the play of invention and adaptation in “tradition”; focusing on contemporary practices that circulate in and among what may otherwise seem prevailing modes of literacy and post-literacy; engaging students in the ethics and politics of doing the work of oral traditions; and, to some extent, de-centering the text in the classroom, constantly recalling students to the value of narrative truths, to their own bodies and memories as repositories of tradition, and to the power and pleasure of improvisation.

I have now redesigned the course around narrative co-production—and four projects: a kidlore autobiography with an active, small group presentation; the evocation and analysis of a family storytelling event, presented as part of a mass “family dinner” in class; in-depth interviews with someone at least two generations older than the student, witnessed in the classroom in the form of a first-person re-performance; and finally, *critical in(ter)ventions*: student projects designed to mobilize oral traditions to *make a difference*—whether, for instance, by initiating a family reunion, transforming a grandmother's stories into a grandson's CD, reinventing a church tradition to honor elders' histories, or introducing personal narrative performances into town policy debates about the rights of troubled teens. The point is to take hold of the tail of performance—and hang on through the unsteady making and remaking of local cultures, large and small.

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Pollock 1998 and 1999.

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## Poetics and Translation Studies

Burton Raffel

I am not, I suspect, the most reliable commentator on what I take to be my “special fields,” poetics and translation studies. As I understand oral tradition, it is deeply rooted in what might be called the actualities of the literary experience—that is, the actual processes by which, over the centuries, oral traditions are both expressed and appreciated. The profound interconnectedness of artist expression and listener appreciation can never be denied in dealing with oral traditions. The dominant thrust of virtually all recent literary studies, however, is to theorize expression and degrade appreciation. “If everyone is somebody,” said W. S. Gilbert, in *The Gondoliers*, “than no one’s anybody.” If we say that the writer is a philosopher is a scientist is a psychologist is an anthropologist is a priest, and so on, then writers are nothing, and their art is a matter of total indifference. And if the nature of art is thus degraded, it is not hard to understand why normative distinctions are not being made in the appreciation of art.

Let me use a very small part of both poetics and translation studies as an example: prosody. Systems of controlled musicality, in all languages, are as irreducibly demonstrable as systems of controlled musicality in music proper. Musicians and musicologists theorize, of course. But they are inevitably grounded in the organization and production of sound, which simply cannot be either ignored or transcended. Prosodists, on the other hand, feel free to proclaim that Chaucer’s prosody—unlike that of the language in which he wrote—was not stress-based but syllable-based, though English is utterly incapable of organizing verbal expression on such a basis.

And translators, as well as those who write about translation, all too often persist in the practice of equating the system of controlled musicality developed in one language with that developed by a very different language. We extend such nonsensical practices even so far as end-rhyme, though any serious student knows that the end-rhyme capacities of languages are enormously different and cannot be blindly equated. Reductionism simply

does not operate in these matters, any more than it does, say, in popular sports. Mister A can and does throw a ball further than Mister B. And differently.

It may well be that, for broad literary success, oral tradition studies are *too* vitally concerned with, and dependent upon, grounded realities. These days, we like our literary studies spread with both hands, to the treetops and the skies. At least as I know it, oral tradition operates, and is understood to operate, with four wheels on the ground and both eyes on the road.

These must be understood as my own opinions, for which neither *Oral Tradition* nor academia itself can be held responsible.

*University of Louisiana at Lafayette*

## **The Search for Wisdom in Native American Narratives and Classical Scholarship**

**William Schneider**

Oral tradition is characterized by three qualities: 1) It is shared orally among people who, to varying degrees, hold common understandings of their histories and cultures. (Some people share in multiple histories and cultures.) 2) The knowledge that comes from oral tradition is learned and subject to common and yet ever-evolving understandings of what constitutes performance and its contents. (Included here is consideration of how stories are told, the roles of storytellers and audiences, the purposes and settings for tellings, and the use of symbols and metaphor to convey what people want to be understood.) 3) Oral traditions are told over time in recognizably similar ways but with variations of detail and emphasis subject to the circumstances of each performance and the liberties taken by the speakers.

In my work, and in the above description, I emphasize the dynamic of living speakers who shape the direction of oral tradition. The speakers decide what stories to tell, when, and why. The stories live and grow in the process of recollection, telling, reception by other people, and re-telling. Others have led me to also consider the possibility of reconstructing oral tradition from written sources. They have demonstrated the potential to use such features in the written record as repetition, culturally charged terms, and the ordering of events to reconstruct what was once implicit for the ancient speakers and their audiences. These scholars weave the remaining threads of evidence into fabrics of understanding. In their classrooms they re-tell the stories and in their publications they explain how to read the orally derived texts. And, perhaps much like the ancient tellers, they use their text-based but originally oral stories to convey wisdom and understanding in their personal lives, to provide comfort in grief, direction in career, or to mount an impassioned plea for justice. Maybe, like the elders I am privileged to work with, these scholars also shape in personal ways responsibility for the direction and perpetuation of the oral tradition. On the

other hand, maybe these scholars don't recognize their role as active participants in an oral tradition that is still evolving.

Whether we work with oral stories in living performance or ancient texts derived from oral stories, we are acutely aware of how important it is to have an audience who shares common understanding of the content, form, and function of the stories and who values them enough to pass them on to future generations. Without sources of oral tradition (written and oral), tellers and audiences, occasions and needs, we are adrift from the wisdom of the past and we have lost a fundamental human potential to address in a collective way both the present and the future.<sup>1</sup>

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