

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

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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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References

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