

Medieval Voices

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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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