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Tradition, Performance, and Poetics in the Early Middle English Period

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Of the many periods into which scholars habitually divide English literary and social history, the post-Conquest period surely ranks as one of the most interesting and most complex. The tumultuous years 1066-1250 witness not only the rise of most of those political and social institutions upon which England's unique national identity rests,¹ but it is also the period in which literacy and its concomitant practices and habits of mind move beyond the walls of the monastic and scholastic cells where they had long been sheltered and begin to become more widely available, and increasingly necessary, to people situated at all levels of the social hierarchy.² But even though literacy comes to be increasingly central to English society in the early Middle Ages, documentary culture does not immediately displace or marginalize oral culture: English society does shift from being largely oral to being increasingly literate following the Norman Conquest, but this movement is marked by the continued interpenetration and interdependence of oral and literate culture, not by their conflict or rupture. Despite the growing importance of documents, orality remains an important component of medieval society because the literate skills of those who daily came into contact with official documents are almost entirely of a practical and rather limited nature: reeves and bailiffs needed to keep accurate records to manage their estates successfully, and lords and overseers needed to have the ability to ascertain the accuracy of these records for themselves so that they might

¹ Among the "great institutions undreamt of before in the life of man" that emerge during this period are "representative assemblies, universities, juries and much else upon which our modern civilization still rests" (Trevelyan 1953:187). More recent considerations of this important period in English history include Chibnall 1986 and Bartlett 1999.

² See further Clanchy 1993.

escape the fate of the unnamed lord who employs Chaucer's "sclendre[,] colerik" (I.587), and slyly dishonest reeve, Osewold.³

For the vast majority of the populace, including most of those who acquired the skills that enabled them to negotiate the official and non-official documents that began to proliferate in the early Middle Ages, the spread of literacy had very little impact upon their experience of the world of imaginative verbal art because throughout the period poetic texts (as well as sacred and even vernacular prose ones) continued to be received primarily through the ear, not the eye. There are any number of reasons for this situation, not least of which is that the skills needed to decode lists of figures or recognize inventory categories are only tangentially connected to those that enabled readers to decode written texts. The persistence of oral habits of mind must also be reckoned with, and we must also not forget that within the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages books were precious commodities that remained well beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest members of lay society.⁴ While members of those households privileged enough to possess a few books presumably had the opportunity to come into direct physical contact with them and so could peruse them privately and at leisure, the majority of the populace had no such opportunity to experience texts as physical objects; rather, as members of what Brian Stock labels "textual communities," they came into contact with texts and textual culture only through the mediation of a reading voice.⁵

Although the means by which verbal art was received remains remarkably stable from very early to very late in the English Middle Ages—the picture of poetic reception Bede presents in Book IV, chapter XXIV (XXII) of the *Historia ecclesiastica* differs little from that which Chaucer presents in Book II of his *Troilus*—, the English poetic tradition

³ Although the acquisition of literate skills becomes ever more necessary to the success of the middle and upper classes of medieval society, members of the lower classes also recognized how important these skills were. As Clanchy argues, serfs and villeins learned that they "needed to imitate their betters and exploit written procedures" if they were to "advance themselves or provide for younger sons or daughters" (1993:49). I cite Benson's (1987) edition of *The Canterbury Tales* throughout.

⁴ W. L. Schramm has calculated that "the value of the 'twenty bokkes, clad in blak or reed,' that Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford owned or would have liked to have owned (*Cant. Tales* I.294) would be about sixty times his annual income, while Jankyn's 'book of wikked wyves' (*Cant. Tales* III.685) would have been a treasure worth several pounds" (cited in Pearsall 1989:7).

⁵ On the nature and role of "textual communities" in the Middle Ages, see Stock 1983:88-240, 1990:140-58.

undergoes nothing short of a sea change during the same period of time. The transformation of the poetics fundamental to English vernacular verse composition is so complete that were we to copy onto a single piece of paper both *Beowulf*'s opening lines—"Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum / þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon, / hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon" (1-3)⁶—and the opening lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*—"Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every venye in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour" (I.1-4)—and then present them to someone who conveniently had no knowledge of the English poetic tradition, the fact that both poems are habitually grouped under the heading "medieval English literature" would not, I think, be the first thing that would spring to her mind. Were we to present our subject with facsimiles of these lines as they appear in their respective manuscripts and were we additionally to read the lines aloud, we would surely not only further stymie her but we would no doubt also further confirm her opinion that these two pieces of poetry are wholly unrelated to each other.⁷

That native English poetics should change dramatically over the course of several centuries is neither hard to account for nor particularly surprising, given the nature of oral traditions and the confluence of internal and external forces that come to bear expressly and uniquely upon the English oral tradition during the Middle Ages. Among his many seminal and lasting contributions to our understanding of oral traditions, Albert B. Lord more than anyone else has demonstrated that these traditions are not fixed, monolithic entities but are rather best thought of as highly protean ones whose constituent elements (especially their specialized verbal

⁶ I cite *Beowulf* throughout from Klaeber's (1950) edition.

⁷ This example is not so far-fetched as it might initially seem; a similar view of the relationship between Old English and Middle English poetry informs the recently published *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, a volume whose one-thousand and sixty-eight pages of commentary, notes, and acknowledgments curiously, if accidentally, reveal its rather skewed sense of the medieval period. For David Wallace, the editor of this volume, and no doubt for many others, the rubric "medieval English literature" apparently applies most fittingly to that literature produced in the period following William's ascension to the English throne, the period in which the autochthonous oral poetics that for hundreds of years had been fundamental to poetic articulation in England begins to be replaced by a new, vastly different poetics grounded not in the specialized metrics and idiom of the English oral tradition but rather in the metrical systems and registers of the literate poetics imported from the continent.

collocations and narrative patterns) are always in a state of flux.⁸ To find evidence of this, we need look no further than to living oral traditions, where the ease with which they accommodate new ideas and new expressions within their traditional frameworks bears witness to their fluid, protean natures. Given my focus on the medieval English oral-literate nexus, my opportunity to do fieldwork is admittedly limited, but I did have occasion to witness, along with John Foley and a number of others, a master *imbongi* seamlessly weave both his very non-traditional surroundings (a living room in a private residence in Piedmont, California) as well as the equally non-traditional owner of the house (an expert on, among other things, all matters Bulgarian as well as the ancient ruler XIII Rabbit) into an otherwise wholly traditional Xhosa praise poem.⁹ But while we have long been aware of just how flexible living oral traditions are, we are only recently beginning to understand that those oral traditions that survive only in writing also display considerable fluidity within their traditional frameworks: for example, even though the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition has long been acknowledged to be a highly, almost cripplingly, deterministic one that circumscribes not simply the metrics but the verbal collocations and thematics of Old English poetic discourse, the works of verbal art produced by Anglo-Saxon poets everywhere witness the highly idiosyncratic ways those poets engage, negotiate, and continually alter what was for them a dynamic and vital tradition. A glance at the unique way the *Beowulf*-poet, arguably the best and seemingly the most traditional of all Anglo-Saxon poets, handles, for example, the “Beasts of Battle” type-scene and his equally unique treatment of the social ideal of the *comitatus* reveals just how much latitude Anglo-Saxon oral poetics affords him and, by extension, all the other poets who similarly engage it.

While the instability of oral traditions accounts for many of the changes that occur in the English poetic tradition, the Norman Conquest, a true watershed in the island’s literary and social history, has a tremendous impact as well. Owing in large part to William’s systematic decimation of the Anglo-Saxon nobility in the decade following the Conquest, secular and religious power on the island becomes concentrated almost entirely within Anglo-Norman hands, a development that radically reduces the audience for

⁸ See especially Lord 1960:68-123, 1986, and 1991:195-210.

⁹ Opland discusses this event at greater length (1992a:429-34). The full text of the poem the *imbongi* D. L. P. Yali-Manisi produced on this occasion, as well as an English translation of it, can be found in Opland 1992b.

traditional, native poetry and further ensures that the remaining audience for such poetry would not be among the politically or socially powerful. As the small number of vernacular English poetic texts extant from the period 1066-1250 attests, the newly installed Norman ruling classes and their Anglo-Norman descendants, like Chaucer and his Parson centuries later,¹⁰ apparently had little appreciation for or interest in verse that adhered to the principles of the native English poetic tradition, but rather, and quite understandably, preferred (and hence supported and fostered through their patronage) verse that was founded upon and that celebrated their own cultural heritage, verse that was, moreover, written not in the foreign tongue and alien metrics of a conquered people, but in the language they themselves spoke and in metrical forms with which they were long acquainted.¹¹

The natural propensity of oral traditions toward change coupled with the tremendous cultural, political, and linguistic pressures that come to bear upon the native English poetic tradition following the Conquest cause it to lose its characteristic univocality and uniformity and to become instead polyphonous and “amorphous” (Pearsall 1977:85). As Derek Pearsall aptly puts it, English poetry after the Conquest is no longer “the product of a coherent tradition with a systematic style and diction and a standardised language, but [is rather] a series of fragmentary responses to a multitude of European influences, in a language thrown open to the winds of change” (*idem*). But even though the English poetic tradition begins to change rather dramatically during the transitional period and even though vernacular poetry need no longer be articulated solely within the stable, homeostatic,

¹⁰ Chaucer not only never composes any significant verse based upon the tradition’s once-dominant metrical system, but he also, in a single line, summarily dismisses the whole tradition of alliterative composition when his Parson announces to the Canterbury pilgrims that he is “a Southren man” who “kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre” (X.42-43). Although Chaucer, whose many poetic innovations and status in the court of London suggest that he was conscious of writing “al of the newe jet” (I.682), may here simply be criticizing his northern and west-midland contemporaries for producing what to his urbane ears and eyes was surely unfashionable verse, the Parson’s confessed inability to compose alliterative poetry nonetheless also constitutes a pointed and only thinly veiled rejection of a poetics that no doubt struck Chaucer and his Ricardian and Lancastrian patrons as being at best hopelessly outmoded and at worst reactionary.

¹¹ This is not to say that we should dismiss out of hand the argument that the nearly complete disappearance of English vernacular poetry from the written records of the eleventh and twelfth centuries reflects the Normans’ concerted attempts to suppress native literary culture, but simply that we need not read such an explicitly and wholly political motive into the absence of native poetry.

and highly deterministic idiom that is Anglo-Saxon oral poetics—a poetics characterized by the remarkable consistency and uniformity of its metrics, its traditional, inherited lexicon, and its broadly shared thematics and narrative patterns—, oral poetics continues to play an important, if admittedly less central, role in the production and reception of vernacular poetry throughout the remainder of the period and traces of it continue to appear in textualized works of verbal art dating from the Renaissance to the present day.

Coming to terms with the nature of post-Conquest oral poetics and situating it within the period's complex cultural and social milieux are two of the central challenges of medieval studies. While I do not have the space in this essay to embark upon a full consideration of either of these thorny and interconnected issues, I would like to take some initial and tentative steps in that direction. I will first consider the relationship of performance to post-Conquest oral poetics before turning to examine in more detail how one isolated component of that poetics functions within three very different texts dating from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the period in which vernacular poetry once again begins to appear in the written record after having virtually disappeared for nearly a hundred years.

Like so much else about the literary and cultural history of the post-Conquest period, the relationship between the vernacular poetic tradition and performance is complex and difficult to untangle. On the one hand, we know that from early in the period onwards poetic composition becomes a private rather than a public process, as poets need no longer enter a public space to articulate poetry but rather retire to the scriptorium or cell to do so.¹² On the other hand, despite being the product of literate authors whose compositional practices closely mirror our own private, non-performative ones, performance continues to cast a large shadow over post-Conquest poetics, and the poetry everywhere evidences what appear to be signs of its fundamental performativity. Among other things, such characteristic features of Middle English verse as the poets' direct addresses to their listening audiences, the oftentimes overwhelming preponderance of highly

¹² Within this private space, the compositional practices of post-Conquest poets appear strikingly modern: not only do they compose pen-in-hand, but the texts they produce tend to be highly intertextual. Laȝamon, the author of the late twelfth-century *Brut*, exemplifies the ways in which early medieval authorial practice reflects our contemporary ones. He first carefully cites a number of real and fictive sources and then informs us that he formed his text by setting “to-gadere” (“together”) the “soþere word” (“true words”) of his sources and “þa þre boc: þrumde to are” (“those three books condensed into one,” 27-28). All quotations from and line references to the *Brut* are from Brook and Leslie's edition (1963/1978). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

iterative and largely meaningless tag-phrases, and the loosely episodic structure of many narratives have all long been attributed to the poets' acute awareness that their "poetry would become known to the public through the ear fully as much as through the eye" (Crosby 1938:414). While there is little doubt that poets composed "with oral presentation in mind, adopting a style, so far as they were capable of it, natural to live presentation" (Baugh 1967:9), we still know frustratingly little about the performative matrix within which these texts were disseminated. Many performers no doubt recited memorized texts, and many others no doubt read aloud from written texts. We also cannot rule out the possibility that some of them may even have composed or recomposed during performance, although the probability of this is admittedly remote even in the earliest part of the period and it diminishes greatly as the period progresses. That these categories are neither exhaustive nor absolute further complicates matters: in practice, performers may have worked partially within some or all of them as they performed, perhaps reciting from memory but not hesitating to improvise by importing blocks of memorized verse from elsewhere in the same or even a different text,¹³ and there is no reason to think that they were incapable of composing new material while they were performing, either by tapping into the highly significant idiom of traditional oral poetics or by some other improvisational process.

But while the fact of performance cannot be disputed, we need to realize that the performative features of post-Conquest poetry reveal far more about its general aurality than its orality; that is, they reveal the degree to which the poetry is oriented towards the ear and little, if anything at all, about the poetics upon which the poem rests. The landscape of Middle English vernacular poetry is dotted with numerous subtly and overtly performative features,¹⁴ among which direct addresses to listening audiences and the trope of the talking book figure prominently, but we need to realize that while these are usually taken as signs of the persistence of the compositional habits and dedicated idiom long identified as being uniquely

¹³ McGillivray labels this phenomenon "memorial transfer," which he defines as "the movement of material from one part of a text to another part which is physically remote, but which is liable to confusion with it because of similarities of situation, content, or language" (1990:5). Baugh 1959 remains a *locus classicus* for this issue. For a more recent treatment of the role memory plays in the production and transmission of Middle English vernacular verse, see Bradbury's nuanced discussion (1998:1-21 *et passim*).

¹⁴ See the examples cited in Crosby 1938, Baugh 1967, and Bradbury 1998.

associated with orality, the performative features of post-Conquest poetry rather witness the poetry's auralty and hence speak primarily to its general mode of transmission and reception without revealing anything about the nature of the poetics upon which it is founded. To cite just three of many possible examples, when the *King Horn*-poet declares that he "schal . . . singe" (3) to his audience (*zou*) the tale of King Murray and his son Horn,¹⁵ or when the *Kyng Alisaunder*-poet memorably if somewhat peevishly requests that his audience quiet down and behave so that he may begin his tale—"Now pes! listneþ and leteþ cheste— / 3ee schullen heren noble geste / Of Alisaundre þe rich[e k]yng" ("Now peace! listen and stop wrangling and you shall hear a noble tale of Alexander the powerful king," 29-31)¹⁶ or finally when the *Gawain*-poet promises that "If 3e wyl lysten þis lay bot on littel quile, / I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde, / with tonge" ("If you will listen to this lay but a little while, I shall tell it at once, as I in town heard it, with tongue," 30-32),¹⁷ they engage the rhetorical topos of performance, not the specialized idiom that is oral poetics. To put this another way, the mode of transmission upon which auralty depends needs to be distinguished from the compositional praxis of oral poetics. What makes this issue especially challenging is that the two at times overlap, but once we admit the distinction by acknowledging the central auralty of post-Conquest poetry we will be better able to see that the key to the continued presence of oral poetics in the increasingly literate Middle Ages does not lie in the possibility of an actual, dynamic performance, since the texts are all indisputably composed in writing, nor in the textualized representations of performance, nor in any of the other performative features embedded into the mute surface of the manuscript page because these are all the fictionalized and perhaps even romanticized products of oftentimes demonstrably literate sensibilities.

As a way of illustrating that we cannot simply and automatically assume that a poem's performative features situate it within the specialized world of oral poetics, I would like to consider briefly the *Brut* and the *Hule and the Niztengale*, two of the earliest poems to appear in English following the Norman Conquest. The former, for which no known English models are

¹⁵ I cite Hall's edition (1901) of the version contained in Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27.2.

¹⁶ I cite Smithers's edition (1952) of the version contained in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Laud Misc. 622.

¹⁷ I cite Davis's edition (1967) of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

extant, is a verse chronicle of very uneven poetic merit that traces the history of England from the time of its eponymous founder Brutus to that of Cadwalader, the last of the British kings. The latter is a much shorter poem in the well established tradition of Latin debate-poetry whose artistry is universally praised.¹⁸ Judging from their length, subject matter, relative levels of artistic achievement, and performative features, the *Hule* stands out as the one far more likely to have been read aloud. An engaging poem, produced by a well trained, imaginative poet writing “in a style of civilised, literary colloquialism” (Stanley 1960:22), it seems well suited to the highly performative matrix through which early Middle English poetry was chiefly disseminated. Its brevity would make it easy to copy and to carry, and a talented reader (or memorizer) would encounter little difficulty bringing to life the poem’s well defined avian characters during a public performance, a task made all the easier by the poem’s highly regular metrics, by its *mise-en-page*, and by the poet’s habit of identifying the poem’s different voices through direct discourse markers such as “Po quap þe Hule” (“Then said the Owl,” 187) and “‘Nay, nay,’ sede þe Niztengale” (“‘Nay, nay,’ said the Nightengale,” 543). Unlike the *Hule*, there is little about the *Brut* that suggests that it was ever intended for oral delivery or that a performance of it would have had any but the most limited appeal to a listening audience: the poem is extremely long (over 32,000 lines in Madden’s 1847 edition),¹⁹ its rhythms and metrics are highly inconsistent and at times frankly soporific, and some of its internal evidence (including the lack of direct “addresses to the audience, real or invented, of the kind that characterize the genre of Middle English romance or Chaucer” [Brewer 1994:204] and Lazamon’s consistent use of the “singular pronoun of address” [*ibid.*:205]) has led at least one scholar to claim recently that Lazamon “appears to envisage a solitary reader” (*idem*) and not a listening audience.

But while the *Hule* is certainly well suited to oral delivery and may have reached its intended audience principally through the mouths of readers

¹⁸ For example, Bennett claims that the *Hule*-poet speaks “in assured tones and show[s] a delicate humour, a rich humanity, and a sensitivity to nature that amounted to genius, and that will hardly be met with again before Marvell’s time” (1986:1), and Bennett and Smithers similarly note that the poet’s wit and sophistication set him apart from other early twelfth-century poets (1968:1). For a full discussion of Middle English debate poetry, the genre to which the *Hule* belongs, along with other examples of the genre, see Conlee 1991.

¹⁹ Brook and Leslie (1963 and 1978) print the text in long lines and so reduce Madden’s total to 16,095. Even when its total number of lines is so reduced, the *Brut* remains one of the longest poems extant from the English Middle Ages.

or reciters, there can be no doubt that it is founded almost exclusively upon a highly literate poetics. Its meter may have developed from the native stress-based alliterative line (Stanley 1960:30-36), but its debt to the French octosyllabic couplet “with its easy rhythm and colloquial flavour” (Bennett and Smithers 1968:1) cannot be ignored. It is also a highly intertextual poem, one with clear generic affiliations and one in which the poet “handles a wide range of source-materials with deceptive ease, introducing proverbs . . . and exemplary stories as if spontaneously, and lacing the debate with technical terms to give it the air of a lawsuit” (Pearsall 1977:94). And finally, there is little trace of the highly specialized idiom through which medieval English oral poetics was preserved and transmitted. In short, everything about the *Hule*, from its physical encoding on the page to its metrics, suggests that it may well be one of the first pieces of vernacular English poetry composed largely, if not entirely, outside the tradition that had given English verse its distinctive shape and sound since at least the fifth century.

By way of contrast, in the entire canon of early Middle English poetry there is probably no poem less well suited for oral delivery than the *Brut*,²⁰ a poem whose subject matter and extraordinary length alone militate strongly against the possibility of its ever having been presented to a listening audience. Internal evidence clearly points to the poem’s written genesis and suggests that Lazamon was “a keen and solitary reader and writer” (Brewer 1994:205) who meant for his poem to be received through the eyes rather than the ears. In a detailed and unusually autobiographical prologue, the poet reveals himself to be a literate author who is at least bilingual and perhaps even trilingual.²¹ His highly intertextual compositional process further reflects the literate poetics upon which his poem is founded: he announces, for example, that once the desire to compose this poem

²⁰ Of course, the *Orrmulum* presents a stiff challenge to the *Brut* in this regard, but the former’s doctrinal focus may have made it more attractive to a contemporary listening audience. On the possibility of the *Brut*’s having been read aloud, see Brewer, who claims without elaboration that a poem such as the *Brut* “might well be read aloud in the thirteenth century, but it lacks obvious oral qualities” (1994:204).

²¹ In addition to English and French, Lazamon may also have had some Latin. He claims to have used a Latin source, which he identifies as the book “þe makede Seinte Albin. / 7 þe feire Austin” (“which Saint Albin and the fair Austin made,” 17-18). Although the few Latin terms that appear in the poem are employed by him in metrically and semantically appropriate ways, it is simply not possible to determine how firm a grasp of Latin he possessed from the evidence currently available to us.

descended upon him, he “gon liðen: wide 3ond þas leode” (“began to journey widely throughout this land,” 14) in search of textual exemplars. Elsewhere in this prologue, Lazamon reveals that he is also directly responsible for the material production of his text—“Feþern he nom mid fingren: 7 fiede an boc-felle” (“Quills he took in his fingers and wrote on the book-skin,” 26)—and he names himself (1), identifies his vocation (1), and locates himself geographically (3-5) before concluding with a request for prayers for himself, his father, and his mother (29-35). Throughout the prologue and elsewhere in the text, he speaks with the cultivated, self-consciously authorial voice we more frequently encounter in the vernacular romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But despite the almost complete absence of any performative features, oral poetics is, as I have argued elsewhere,²² nevertheless fundamental to Lazamon’s poem, and its influence can be detected in the poem’s syntax, diction, lexicon, thematics, narrative structure, and physical encoding.

Virtually from its inception, oral theory has stressed the necessary and logical connection between performance and the specialized poetics foundational to traditional verbal art, and, while it is no doubt true that the richly associative, meaning-laden idioms deployed by poets in oral cultures evolved in response to the pressure of composing during performance, we have lately begun to understand that oral poetics does not exist solely in symbiosis with performance. While it may be most readily apprehensible in the dynamic, embodied space that Foley has labeled the “performance arena,” a space he defines as “the locus in which some specialized form of communication is uniquely licensed to take place” (1995:8), oral poetics is not, as Foley acknowledges,²³ restricted to that space but functions within the broader parameters of what he labels the “textual arena” (*ibid.*: 58) as well as what we might call the “compositional arena,” an area open to all poets who engage the traditional idiom, whether they do so fully and publicly during performance or partially and privately with pen in hand. Severing post-Conquest oral poetics from the performative matrix may appear to be both illogical and heretical, since, as we have learned from Parry, Lord, and more recently Foley, performance is nothing less than the event that both enables the production of traditional poetry and determines

²² See, for example, Amodio 1987 and 1988.

²³ Perhaps more than anyone else, Foley is acutely aware of the complex ways in which oral and literate poetics intersect. See especially his remarks in the second and third chapters of *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995:56-98).

the channels for its reception, but shifting the mode of production from mouth to finger does not necessarily entail a concomitant change in the ways poetry is articulated or received because oral poetics remains a powerful and flexible significative idiom whether it is deployed within the wholly traditional, homeostatic space of the “performance arena” or the more heterogeneous space of the “compositional arena.”²⁴ The traditional idiom retains its significative power even when the primary conduit for engaging it is the pen and not the tongue because, as Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe notes, “[w]riting does not alienate a text from traditional meaning immediately—early written texts will still appeal to immanent meaning despite their written condition” (1998:53). In the remainder of this essay, I would like to consider in more detail the ways in which oral poetics continues to figure within the complex stew of post-Conquest vernacular poetry by focusing on the simplex *abelzen*, which the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) tells us means “to anger or incense; to grow angry.”

In Old English poetry, the ancestor of *abelzen*, (*x*-)*bolgen(-mod)*, functions associatively and metonymically within Anglo-Saxon oral poetics to signal the approach of an impending slaughterous encounter.²⁵ As do all *sêmata* deployed within the parameters of a traditional oral poetics, (*x*-)*bolgen(-mod)* clearly signals an “emergent reality” (Foley 1999:26); in this instance the *sêma* thematizes imminent slaughter for an audience whose channels for receiving poetry are situated within the appropriate oral poetics.²⁶ In poems as varied as *Beowulf*, *Andreas*, and *Juliana*, the simplex links what is “present and explicit to what is immanent and implied” (Foley 1999:26) and thus serves as a conduit through which poets economically bring institutionalized meaning to bear on the narrative present and enable the interpretative channels through which their poems will be received. In the *Brut*, the affective dynamics of the simplex *abolzen* (past participle of the ME infinitive *abelzen*) and its variants *abolwen* and *abælh* is remarkably similar to that of the Anglo-Saxon (*x*-)*bolgen(-mod)*, as we can see from considering the way *Lazamon* employs it during the episode in which Arthur

²⁴ Along with Foley, Doane (1991, 1994) and O’Brien O’Keeffe (1990, 1998) have done much to help us understand the dynamic nature of the manuscript page and to appreciate the role scribes played in producing vernacular poetry.

²⁵ Of course, Anglo-Saxon poets who wished to thematize slaughter could proceed in any number of directions; engaging the affective dynamics of the simplex (*x*-)*bolgen (-mod)* is just one of the many options that were open to them.

²⁶ I borrow the term *sêma* from Foley. See further his discussion in *Homer’s Traditional Art* (1999:13-34).

accepts King Frolle of France's offer "to-dælen and to-dihten þis kine-lond mid fihte" ("to deal and dispose of this kingdom with a fight," 11791) "bi-twixen unke seoluen" ("between ourselves," 11790). After a protracted build-up, in which Lazamon reports several times that Frolle wishes he never made such an offer and in which the poet carefully chronicles the names of those who will witness the battle, the fight begins unremarkably: Arthur knocks Frolle from his horse and Frolle succeeds in unhorsing Arthur by killing his steed. Because the two antagonists are unusually well matched, the fight promises to be a protracted affair—"beien heo weoren cnihtes kene: ohte men and wihte" ("they were both brave knights, worthy and valiant men," 11935)—but during an assault by Frolle, one in which he succeeds in knocking Arthur's shield to the ground, Arthur sustains a "wunde . . . feouwer unchene long" ("four inches long," 11961), the blood from which "orn a-dun: ouer al his breoste" ("ran down over all his breast," 11963). After receiving this wound, Arthur, who approached the fight gleefully anticipating that it would end with him adding France to his growing list of recently conquered lands and who perhaps did not expect much of a contest from Frolle, becomes "abolze: swiðe an his heorte" ("greatly enraged in his heart," 11964). The appearance of the simplex *abolzen* is, in this instance, immediately followed by a graphic account of slaughter (11965-69):

. . . [Arthur] his sweord Caliburne: swipte mid maine:
and smat Frolle uppen þæne hælm: þat he atwa helden.
þurh-ut þere burne hod: þat hit at his breoste at-stod.
Þa feol Frolle: folde to grunde.
uppen þan gras-bedde: his gost he bi-læfde.

. . . Arthur his sword Caliburn swung with might
and struck Frolle upon the helmet so that it split in two
and cut through the mail-coif until it stopped at his breast.
Then fell Frolle to the earth of the field;
on that grass bed he gave up his ghost.

As was true in the Old English poems in which (*x*-)*bolgen(-mod)* is situated within the thematics of slaughter, there is in the *Brut* considerable variation in the number of lines that elapse between the appearance of the simplex and the slaughter that it announces and thematizes, but *abolzen* is directly linked to slaughter every time it occurs in the text.²⁷ In the great

²⁷ In addition to the Arthur / Frolle episode, *abolzen* is linked to an explicit slaughterous encounter eighteen other times: 784/786; 850/861 ff.; 3188/3195; 3648,

majority of these instances, the simplex functions precisely as it does in Anglo-Saxon oral poetics by pointing narratively to an imminent slaughter and metanarratively to the simplex's traditional, immanent meaning. However, in a few instances, Lazamon's usage of *abolzen* diverges from the expected and logical pattern displayed in Anglo-Saxon oral poetics. These moments of divergence prove to be of special interest because they demonstrate not only the simplex's continued ability to fulfill its traditional function, but also the degree to which traditional oral poetics combines seamlessly with Lazamon's literate poetics.

During the episode that details Uther Pendragon's unsuccessful attempts to build his castle (each night all the stones that had been erected during the day fall "to þan grunde" ["to the ground," 7898]), Uther tells the young Merlin that the royal counselors have revealed that if Uther were to "nime þi blod: ut of þire breoste: / 7 minne wal wurchē: 7 do to mine l(i)me. / þenne mai he stonde: to þere worlde longe" ("take your blood out of your breast and work it into my wall and mix it into my lime, then may the castle stand to the end of the world," 7900-02). Merlin finds this news justifiably alarming, but rather than quailing before the king, the young sorcerer responds by becoming "bælh on his mode" ("enraged in his mind," 7904). Although seventy-five lines elapse between this affective cue and its expected complement, Joram and the seven others who counseled Uther to mix Merlin's blood into the mortar for the castle are eventually beheaded. But while the death of the counselors fulfills the narrative's expected, traditional pattern, what is noteworthy about the scene is that the simplex serves as the narrative equivalent of a squinting modifier: it not only signals an imminent death, but also looks back to an implied (but ultimately unrealized) slaughter: that of Merlin by Uther.

We find precisely the same pattern at work when Constantine becomes *a-bolzen* (14309) after learning that Modred's sons "þuhten to slan" ("thought to slay," 14308) him. The slaughter thematized by *a-bolzen* occurs twice in less than fifty lines when Constantine first the "hefd . . . of-swipte" ("the head . . . swiped off," 14332) of Modred's unnamed son and again shortly thereafter when he does the same thing to Meleus, Modred's

3679/3720; 7532/7617; 7904/7979-80; 10594/10595-96; 10609/10607-08, 10615-16; 13065, 13156/13204; 13870/13889-90; 14174/14196; 14309/14332, 14346; 15123, 15132/15149-50; 15457/15464; 15790/15840. In two instances *abolzen* is closely linked to a threatened slaughter (12599/12607; 14076/14081-82) which then occurs somewhat later (13301 ff./14255), and in one it is used to describe the mental state of a cannibalistic monster (12944) who is disfigured in a battle with Arthur (13000-12) before being beheaded by Bediver (13032).

other son: “Constantin braid ut his sweorde: 7 þat hafde him of-swipte” (“Constantine drew out his sword and swiped his head off,” 14346). As he did earlier, Lazamon once again expands the simplex’s rhetorical horizon to include an implied but unrealized slaughter—namely that of Constantine by Modred’s sons—that, when coupled with the explicit slaughter that eventually occurs, effectively (and affectively) frames the simplex. Far from destroying the simplex’s traditional referentiality or compromising the narrative integrity of the thematics of slaughter, Lazamon’s departures from the traditional pattern broaden and enrich it and so point to the tradition’s elastic and accommodating framework. Although he composes in writing and not in the crucible of performance, Lazamon engages not a fixed, static oral poetics—if indeed there can be such a thing—but one that is as dynamic and ever-evolving as those theorized for or witnessed in performance-based oral traditions.

Abelzen survives in several other texts (both prose and verse) that date from the early Middle English period, among which are the *Orrmulum* and *The Hule and Niztengale*, two texts in which medieval English oral poetics plays, at best, a very small role. That we should discover poems in the early Middle English period that stand at some remove from medieval English oral poetics is not surprising since, as noted above, the system that determined the shape and sound of English poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period underwent a sea change in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. Similarly, we should not be surprised to discover some trace of the dedicated register of medieval English oral poetics in poems composed outside of its sphere of influence because, even in a time of great flux for the English poetic tradition, the register of oral poetics continued to allow authors to engage “the meaning-bearing potential of . . . tradition, even if at one expressive remove” (Foley 1995:94).

In Orm’s long and truly quirky poem, the simplex appears nine times, invariably in the form *bolzhen*, and it is always either closely linked to an account of actual slaughter or, in two cases, to a threatened and imminent but unrealized slaughter. As we can see in an episode drawn from the end of Herod’s life, the simplex’s traditional contours are still clearly visible, and its affective dynamics still intact, even though Orm, who composes his poem in order “to provide English verse-translations of the Gospels in the massbook for the whole year, with appropriate homiletic interpretation” (Pearsall 1977:102), is a decidedly literate poet whose remarkably consistent, if wholly idiosyncratic, system for representing his language in writing reveals that his chief orientation is ocular and aural, not oral.

In his account of Herod’s last days, Orm explicitly links the physical torment Herod suffers to the tyrant’s lifetime of sinful behavior. Although

they are both interesting in their own right, I wish to focus neither on the extreme pain that besets Herod near the end of his life nor the obvious moral lesson Orm attempts to wring from the episode; rather, I wish to concentrate on the way that oral poetics cues the approach of slaughter in this indisputably literate text. According to Orm, even near death, Herod continues to engage in the slaughterous behavior for which he is infamous: the doctors who are summoned to treat him are all put to death once they fail to alleviate his suffering, and, in an effort to extend his control of earthly matters even beyond the grave, Herod's men are instructed to kill a large number of recently imprisoned nobles following his death so that his people will be too busy mourning their newly murdered husbands and fathers to rejoice over the tyrant's demise. In his desperation to find a way to end his suffering, Herod even attempts to take his own life with a knife he requests ostensibly to pare an apple. His (amazingly) still loyal servants thwart his suicide attempt, but news of it reaches one of his sons (whom the tyrant had earlier imprisoned) who "warrþ swiþe bliþe þa / 7 toc to lahhzhenn lhude" ("becomes very happy then and took to laughing loudly," 8141-42).²⁸ Upon learning of his son's reaction, Herod predictably "warrþ wrap 7 bollghenn, / 7 badd tatt mann himm sollde anan / Wipþ swerdes egge cwellenn" ("becomes angry and enraged and commands a man at once to kill him with a sword's edge," 8144-46) something that Orm reports "wass þanne sone don / To forþenn himm hiss wille" ("was soon done to fulfill his will," 8147-48).

Elsewhere in the poem, we can see that the simplex continues to function as a *sêma* even when no slaughter occurs in its immediate narrative context: Herod's several vows to murder the newborn Christ (7260-61; 7312-13) are preceded in each instance by the simplex (7145, 7159, 7197, 7201), and the episode in 2 John in which Christ prudently departs from Judea upon learning that the Pharisees are *bollzhenn* with him contains a reference to Herod's slaughter of the innocents (19588)²⁹ and concludes with a description of the crucifixion (19809-18), two events that do not bear on the narrative moment being related but that serve as traditional and metanarrative complements to *bollzhenn*. The simplex is used more

²⁸ I cite the *Ormmulum* throughout from White's edition (1852).

²⁹ Orm relates the slaughter of the innocents at 7995 ff.

restrictively in the *Orrmulum* than it is in the *Brut* or in Old English poetry,³⁰ but it nevertheless remains closely connected to the expressive economy of oral poetics even when it is used so narrowly by a poet of such severely limited means.³¹

Abelzen also occurs in the *Hule and Niztengale*, a poem whose graceful execution, intelligence, wit, and overall artistry set it so far apart not only from the plodding, uninspired work of Orm, but from the rest of the extant verse contemporary with it that its appearance in the twelfth century has been justly deemed nothing short of “miraculous” (Bennett and Smithers 1968:1). Even though the simplex occurs only once in the poem, it nonetheless sheds valuable light upon medieval English oral poetics in the post-Conquest period because it demonstrates that the traditional idiom retains traces of its communicative power even when it is deployed in a wholly new and unexpected way within a radically different poetics. The narrative context within which the *Hule*-poet situates the simplex—one rife with the potential for violence—is wholly traditional: the Owl’s imposing, threatening physical presence is never far from the Nightengale’s consciousness; the Nightengale twice points to the Owl’s monstrosity by labeling her an “vnwi3t” (“monster,” 33, 90); and, most importantly, both the Nightengale and the Owl comment explicitly on the Owl’s *cliures* (“talons,” 84) and the violence the Owl would like to perform on the Nightengale’s body with them and her equally dangerous beak. Not only is the Owl capable of and perhaps even predisposed towards acting violently (she is, after all, a raptor), but the Nightengale also does all she can to deserve being on the receiving end of the Owl’s malevolence. After completing the *longe tale* (140) in which she voices the platonic argument that owls’ ugliness, lack of virtue, and low place in the great chain of being explain their degraded and disgusting habits—the chief of which is their proverbial tendency to foul their own nests—the Nightengale “song so lude & so scharpe, / Ri3t so me gulde schille harpe” (“sang so loud and so sharp as if one plucked a shrill harp,” 141-42). When we learn in the next line that the Nightengale’s deeply insulting speech results in the Owl becoming so outraged that she “sat tosvolle & ibolwe” (“sat swollen and enraged,” 143), all the narrative signs point to a swift, unhappy, and decidedly bloody

³⁰ In the *Orrmulum* the simplex applies chiefly to Herod, who is so closely associated with it that he is even invoked as a murderer in the one episode in which the simplex is applied to someone other than him.

³¹ As Pearsall has aptly put it, Orm’s “methods of filling out his verses, combined with a propensity to explain and repeat everything several times over, make for infinite tedium” (1977:102).

conclusion to their encounter. All that is missing is the graphic slaughter that serves as the simplex's traditional complement.

As readers of the poem know, however, no slaughter occurs here or elsewhere in the poem's 1794 lines. In fact, the poem ends without a single feather being more than metaphorically ruffled; rather than resorting to violence to settle their quarrel, the two disputants civilly agree to fly off together to Portesham so that the very capable and learned Maistre Nichole can adjudicate matters (1778). Not only does the simplex's expected complement never occur, but the simplex itself is put to a very different, post-traditional purpose: after building up the expectation of slaughter before, during, and after the Nightengale's first extended speech (55-138), an expectation that culminates in the appearance of the traditionally freighted sign *ibolwe*, the *Hule*-poet immediately shifts the ground under the simplex and disconnects it from its traditional expressive economy by deploying it not as a traditional signal of imminent slaughter but as the pivotal element in a post-traditional moment. What follows the appearance of the simplex in the narrative is not a graphic account of slaughter but the poet's comic revelation that the Owl is so swollen with anger that she looks "Also hadde one frogge isuolze" ("as if she had swallowed a frog," 146). The figurative distension so important to the simplex's affective dynamics, a distension made explicit in the Anglo-Saxon simplex (x-) *bolgen(-mod)*, is here humorously literalized and the violence that it thematizes is comically defused. Rather than signaling the imminence of a terrifyingly violent outburst as it does when Beowulf is described as *bolgenmod* in the moments before Grendel arrives at Heorot (709a), or when Arthur becomes "abolze: swiðe an his heorte" in the *Brut* (11964), or when Herod becomes *bollzhenn* in the *Orrmulum* (8144), in the *Hule* the simplex signifies the literal, and decidedly ridiculous, physical distension that occurs when an owl swallows a frog whole. Although my experience in these matters is limited, I imagine that it would be difficult for one to maintain his or her dignity, let alone project even a moderately threatening image, while ingesting a frog whole.

For the remainder of the scene (and the poem), the Nightengale remains wary of the Owl's potential for violence, mentioning both the latter's "scharpe clawe[s]" twice (153, 154) and her "cliuers supe stronge" ("very strong talons," 155) and the promise of violence surely underlies the Owl's restrained response to the Nightengale's initial *ad avem* attack (150-52):

Whi neltu flon into þe bare
 & sewi ware unker bo
 Of brizter howe, of uairur blo?

Why don't you fly into the open
 And show which of us two
 Has the brighter hue, the fairer complexion?

But the Nightengale, being far too smart to fall for such a transparent ruse, remains safely hidden among the branches of her hedge and so no slaughter ensues. The *Hule*-poet clearly taps into the traditional, dedicated register of oral poetics and exploits the traditional channels of reception it affords him, but he reveals his distance from the tradition by thwarting the audience's expectations and using the simplex in a narrowly denotative (and hence post-traditional) fashion rather than a richly connotative one. He skillfully draws upon the simplex's traditional, inherent meaning in this episode by gesturing towards the violence (actual or implied) that the *sêma* signals in medieval English oral poetics, but what is finally most important about its appearance in the *Hule* is the idiosyncratic meaning the poet confers upon it:³² the Owl, rather than appearing as a dangerously distended monster who appears to be on the verge of tearing her physically outmatched opponent to shreds, looks more like an indignantly puffed-up society matron of the type Margaret Dumont portrayed so ably on stage and screen.

The doublet *tosvolle* that precedes *ibolwe* further evidences the scene's dependence on a literate rather than oral poetics and on conferred rather than inherent meaning. In Old English poetry, a poetry in which variation plays an enormously important role, (x-) *bolgen(-mod)* is only twice found in an appositive construction;³³ every other time it appears, it stands on its own. If we adopt J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre's reading (1992) and take *ibolwe* to mean "puffed up," we can see that the poet might have included *tosvolle* for emphasis so that his audience would be sure to get the joke that followed, but there is little etymological support for accepting their reading over the *MED*'s, which I cited above, or Stanley's "swollen

³² See Foley (1991:8-9) for a fuller discussion of the differences between the meaning that inheres in *sêmata* in a traditional oral poetics and the meaning that authors confer upon them in a literate poetics.

³³ Of these two instances, only one is unambiguously an appositive construction. In *Guthlac*, the devils besetting Guthlac are first described as being *bolgenmode* (557b) and then immediately as "wraðe wræcmæcgas" ("angry wretches," 558a). In what is not strictly speaking an appositive construction, the evil men who are the subject of *Meters of Boethius* 25 are similarly described as being *gebolgene* (45a) shortly before we learn that in their breast "swiðan welme / hatheortnesse" ("fury strongly surged," 46b-47a). I cite Krapp and Dobbie's edition of *Guthlac* (1936) and Krapp's edition of the *Meters* (1932).

with anger” (1960) or Bennett and Smithers’s “swollen, distended (with rage)” (1968).³⁴ The appearance of the doublet does suggest the degree to which the affective dynamics of *ibolwe* has become diminished for the *Hule*-poet (and / or his intended audience): instead of being a traditional *sêma* linked directly and metonymically to worlds of established, shared meaning, it instead appears to be one that needs direction and clarification (as do all *sêmata* in post-traditional poetics, whether or not they descend from oral poetics) because its traditional referentiality has become occluded and its connection to the thematics of slaughter needs reinforcing.³⁵

That the *Hule*-poet should be able both to tap into the traditional affective dynamics of a lexeme and then put that lexeme to a decidedly post-traditional use is not surprising: his actions differ only in degree, not in kind, from those of poets who worked wholly within the far more deterministic, but equally non-performative oral poetics upon which Old English poetry rests. Just as the literate Anglo-Saxon poets who composed and physically encoded Old English poetry necessarily altered the tradition in the course of negotiating it,³⁶ so too did Middle English poets constantly effect changes in their evolving tradition by, among other things, putting traditional *sêmata* to new, not wholly traditional uses and by incorporating elements of non-native poetics into their own.

Given the slipperiness of oral traditions and their complex intersections with literate traditions, we may never be able to establish any sort of absolute fixed standard against which the traditionality or non-traditionality of any given medieval English poetic practice can be confidently measured. This is so because innovation, long considered a sure sign of post-traditionality, lies at the heart of those poems produced by even the most traditional of poets and because the communicative economy of oral poetics—its “highly focused mode of signification” (Foley 1995:81)—remains available to those poets whose poetics are literate and

³⁴ Burrow and Turville-Petre’s reading would be more secure if *ibolwe* were one of the only elements in the poet’s lexicon clearly rooted in Anglo-Saxon, but as even a cursory glance reveals, the poem has strong and deep lexical connections to Anglo-Saxon.

³⁵ Renoir (1988:169-74) rightly argues that we can best understand both the appearance of the traditional oral theme of the hero on the beach and the *Gawain*-poet’s famous direct address to his listening audience at the beginning of *Sir Gawain* by recognizing that the “poem is intended for an audience quite unfamiliar with these things and therefore in need of some kind of explanation” (172).

³⁶ See the works cited in note 24 above.

non-performative. As we trace the trajectory of oral poetics from its logical, if theoretical, genesis in a primary or wholly oral culture, to its commingling with a nascent literate poetics, to its continued survival (albeit in a diminished and diminishing capacity) in a culture increasingly dominated by a literate poetics, what stands out most strikingly is its flexibility and resilience. Oral poetics survives for so long and has such a great impact upon the literary history of medieval England not because it is the object of conscious preservation but because its channels of meaning remain open to poets who are entirely free to employ them (either wittingly or unwittingly) in traditional or non-traditional ways.³⁷

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³⁷ A slightly different version of this article was presented at the University of Missouri-Columbia on 24 April, 2000, as the 1999-2000 Lord and Parry Lecture.

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