The Minim-istic Imagination: Scribal Invention and the Word in the Early English Alliterative Tradition

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Few medievalists today would invoke the Great Divide between the oral and the literate, for one of the more convincing arguments of the past quarter-century has been the mixed nature of medieval textuality: how oral-derived rhetoric persists well into the "literate" era. Influenced by the work of Alain Renoir, Walter Ong, John Miles Foley, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, and others, oral theorists now prefer to speak of an oral-literate continuum, a continuum featuring a complex weave of oral and literate signification. In the English alliterative tradition, for instance, we might envision a stretch of textuality from the pre-Conquest *Beowulf*, through Lawman's *Brut*, all the way to the fifteenth-century *Siege of Jerusalem*, a system of texts that deploy, at various removes, a traditional native register. Hence, even though a late text like *The Siege of Jerusalem* is well within the "literate" era, its word and phrasal stock is nevertheless aligned with traditional contexts, and thus retains a certain connotative potential. Yet with this model of the oral-literate continuum before us, it is easy to conceive of a gradual decay, a process in which orality slowly becomes displaced, unproductive, and ultimately vestigial.

I would like, however, to demonstrate in this essay—by looking specifically at the English alliterative tradition—that, in fact, the tension between oral and literate signification remains alive far into the so-called "literate" era. I will suggest that some vestiges of oral-derived rhetoric do not merely decay in the Middle English period; rather they become subject to the complex processes of amalgamation, transformation, and even reinvention. A close reading of the scribal variants in *The Siege of Jerusalem* can illustrate this process. *Siege* yields at least two remarkable points for our understanding of a waning orality: that ambiguous word-minim clusters associated with oral tradition could catalyze new or syncretic images; and that scribes, as late as the fifteenth century, could seek to infuse a "literate" text with oral-derived "word-power."[1]

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[1] The term "word-power" is John Miles Foley's. See espec. Foley 1995:1-98.

What drives the processes of amalgamation, transformation, and reinvention, witnessed in *Siege* and other Early English alliterative works, is "scribal reperformance"—a phenomenon that has received much attention of late. Katharine O'Brien O'Keeffe and A. N. Doane, for example, have demonstrated that in Anglo-Saxon England scribes participated in a fluid textuality: in their act of reception, in the instant between reading and writing, scribes would often recompose—or "reperform"—the manuscript "text" according to the principles of oral composition, with little regard for textual fixity. Doane argues that "the scribe re-creates the transmitted message through his own performance in the tradition" (1994:421-22) and that his "performance is therefore considered not as a faithful duplication, but as the exercise of his own 'communicative competence' within the tradition that normally resides in speaking and traditional memory" (*ibid*.:423). Doane envisages the actual scribal process as follows, "the script [*i.e., manuscript*] would be a kind of prompt or cue in two registers—presenting fixed words in one register that would suggest and promote words in another. The performing scribe thus produces a palimpsestic text in which the old text largely predetermines the new but is authoritatively overridden by the words of the new oral/written text" (*ibid*.:432, clarification and italics mine). This malleable verbal art, in which scribes reprocess a "text" through their own particular formulaic conditioning, in which the scribal and poetic acts conflate, as it were, continues beyond the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. As I have demonstrated elsewhere by comparing the two scribes of Laȝamon's *Brut*, even in Middle English texts scribes could independently reperform traditional scenes, such as battle descriptions or sea journeys.[2] When scribes encounter such type-scenes, they often leave off their script for their own formulaic rendering, not from any idiosyncratic desire but from a compositional license inherent in the tradition of performance. This phenomenon of scribal reperformance says much about textual authority: when scribes transpose traditional type-scenes, any sense of single authorship yields to a more immanent textuality in which the scribe has, in a sense, equal authority with the poet. Like the poets, scribes could access the deep structure of alliterative verse, because the verse depended largely on tradition (on a "continuum of production and reception"), not on innovation.

I would now like to consider a single passage from *The Siege of Jerusalem* to illustrate a dialogical turf war of sorts. I wish to demonstrate how oral-derived and literate registers—or metonymic and semantic

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[2] See Watson 1998b.

discourse[3]—compete in the various scribal versions of the *Siege*. Because the work survives in seven manuscripts from the early to mid-fifteenth century and because it has a penchant for the traditional type-scenes of alliterative verse—storms, sea journeys, the arming of heroes, and battle—we are able to see a range of scribal tensions at work, a range of scribal readings and reperformances. In the "text" of *Siege*, we occasionally encounter a half dozen scribal "readings" or "reception strategies," which derive from the various *Siege* manuscripts.[4] Accordingly, the composite picture is rich, as it affords a glimpse of several scribes at work, each one capable of decoding and encoding formulaic idioms with varying degrees of competence in the tradition: some will supplant unfamiliar readings with equivalent formulaicisms, while others will refashion decaying oral-derived structures by blending them with literate amplification.

The passage to be considered is a description of nightfall set between waves of the Siege—between the Romans' first and second attack on the Jewish forces. The onset of twilight is intended, so one would think, as a dramatic pause between the two battle sequences. Yet the scribes get swept apart on their reading of this passage. One school views the passage as a simple portrait of night falling, but the other school construes the nightscape as an ominous prelude to the second battle: as night darkens, the sky resounds and birds shake out their feathers—details that are the traditional cues of imminent battle in the alliterative tradition.

The passage under consideration reads as follows (725-30):[5]

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[3] John Miles Foley makes this distinction between "metonymic" and "semantic" discourse; see especially Foley 1991:1-60 and 1995:1-98. See also Watson 1998b and Watson forthcoming.

[4] The versions of the poem are dated as follows: L (Bodleian 1059), early fifteenth century; A (Brit. Libr. Add. 31042), mid-fifteenth century; V (Brit. Libr. Cotton Vesp. E xvi), fifteenth century; C (Brit. Libr. Cotton Caligula. A ii.), mid-fifteenth century; U (Camb. Univ. Mm. 5.14), fifteenth century; D (Lambeth Palace 491), first half of the fifteenth century; E (Ashburnham 130), fifteenth century. For a more detailed account of the manuscript histories, see Kölbing 1932:espec. Introduction. See also Bonnie Millar's important and updated discussion of the manuscript contexts of *Siege* (2000:espec. 15-75).

[5] All excerpts of *Siege* are from Kölbing's 1932 edition. Translations throughout are mine unless otherwise noted. For purposes of clarity, bold type is used in excerpted passages and translations to highlight the individual words, phrases, and lines under direct discussion.

By þat was þe day don, dym[m]ed þe skyes,
merked [þe] montayns   & mores a-bout,
foules fallen to fote   & her feþres r[y]s[t]en,
þe nyȝt-wacche to þe walle   & waytes to blowe;
bryȝt fures a-boute betyn   a-brode in þe oste
þe kyng & his consail   carpen to-gedr.

With that the day was over, the skies dimmed,
the mountains and surrounding moors grew murky.
Birds fell to foot, and shook their feathers.
The night-watch came to the wall, and sounded their
trumpets. Bright fires were kindled about, as the king
and his counsel spoke together among the host.

In the past, this passage has been understood as a literary borrowing, pure and simple, with its source in a corresponding depiction of night from the late fourteenth-century poem *The Destruction of Troy* (7348-54): [6]

When the day ouer drogh, & the derk entrid,
the sternes full stithly starond o lofte;
all merknet the mountens & mores aboute;
the ffowles þere fethers foldyn to gedur.
Nightwacce for to wake, waites to blow;
tore fyres in the tenttes, tendlis olofte;
all the gret of the grekes gedrit hom somyn.

When the day drew to a close and darkness set in,
the stars shone brightly in the sky. The mountains and
the moors grew murky all around. **The birds folded their
feathers together**. The nightwatch woke, and sounded their
trumpets. Tremendous fires were kindled aloft in the tents,
as all the great ones among the Greeks gathered together.

Although we have neatly corresponding ideas and echoic phrasing in these comparable passages—the darkening day, the murky mountains and moors, the sentries on guard, the campfires—to understand the passage as a mere "literary borrowing" does not do justice to the complex poetics at work.   In *Troy*, the force of the passage is clear: night falls, birds sleep, folding feathers together; it is an image of tranquility, of calm before the storm. But *Siege* offers a more equivocal image: instead of the phrase in *Troy*, "the derk entrid" ("the dark entered"), the *Siege* phrase is a traditional alliterative

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[6] The text is Panton and Donaldson 1874; the translation is mine.   On the "borrowings" of *Siege* from *Troy*, see the introduction to Kölbing 1932:espec. xxvii-xxx.

formula, "dym[m]yd þe skyes" ("the skies dimmed"); and instead of the *Troy*-phrase "þere fethers foldyn to gedur" ("their feathers folded together"), the *Siege* phrase is "her feþres r[y]s[t]en" ("their feathers shook"). These images of the *Siege* text have been preferred by Kölbing at the expense of the other scribal variants. When we acknowledge the full spectrum of variants, the tensions in the passage increase considerably:

> dym[m]ed þe skyes: dymmed (DUC); dynnede (A); dymned (L)

> her feþres r[y]s[t]en: to reste (DUC); rysten (A); rusken (L)

Both of these textual moments—"dym[m]ed the skyes" and "her feþres r[y]s[t]en"—are images caught in flux: they preserve the competing rhetoric of oral-derived and written systems. If we attend to the scribal forms, then the image of the sky is at once "dimming" and "dinning," and the feathers, with the scribal forms *rysten* "shook" (cf. ON *hrista* "to shake"; ME *rusian* "to shake") and *rusken* "to shake vigorously" (cf. ON *ryskja* "to shake violently"), both at rest and aflutter. What can account for these equivocating images and this scribal rift?

The rival imagery among the *Siege* scribes has its source, I would propose, in the act of reception. The point of divergence depends on how the scribes choose to "read" this twilight scene—either as a tranquil respite or an ominous prelude to battle, as punctuation to the preceding battle or as a harbinger of the battle to follow shortly.[7] As a consequence, certain scribes (DUC) adhere to the *Troy* reading—those who have a "dimming" (darkening) field and perfectly restful birds—while the others (AL) evoke a "dinning" field and an animated, feather-shaking bird. These latter two responses (AL) are an attempt to reinscribe oral-derived rhetoric upon a "literate" context, an effort to invest the passage with a connotative potential. The scribal performance seeks to imbue this battle prelude with a resonant native idiom, which I have identified elsewhere as "Óðinn's Storm."[8]

For our purposes here, "Óðinn's Storm" can be understood as a stylized but protean compositional unit that is a feature of early Germanic verse. Its presence is marked by a flexible field of stock images

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[7] In fewer than fifteen lines after this evening portrait, skylarks and trumpets will rouse Waspasian's troops for battle (738-39): "Leuerockes vpon lofte lyften her steuenes / Burnes busken hem out of bed with bemes loude" ("Larks raised their voices on high. Men hastened themselves out of bed with trumpets loud").

[8] See Watson 1998a, 1998b, 2002, and forthcoming.

underpinned by a core of lexical cues. Among the common generative features of the Óðinn's Storm site are a "dinning" item (e.g., earth, shields, feathers); a "shaking" item (e.g., spears, birds, wolves, mailcoats); a "dew- or hail-covered" item (e.g., birds, wolves, spears); and a "yelling or crying" item (e.g., birds, spears, mailcoats). The phrasal stock is quite stable, with a decided preference for such lexemes as *rusien* "to shake" (OE *hryssan*; ON *hrista*); *dunien* "to resound" (OE *dynnan*; ON *dynja*); OE *scacan* "to shake" (ON *skaka*); OE *gyllan* "to yell"; OE *deawig* "dewy," *hrim* "frost," or OE *hagl* "hail"; and OE *feþeres* "feathers." When occurring in combination, these lexical cues would likely have elicited an extratextual resonance, or what Foley has called "word-power"; once they may have also been mythologically effective, serving to invoke the specific presence of Óðinn and his valkyries.[9] For instance, take that famous Old English moment when the Wanderer's tender image of his liege dissolves into a wintry sea of bathing gulls (Krapp and Dobbie 1936:ll. 45-48):

> Ðonne onwæcneð eft   wineleas guma,
> gesihð him beforan   fealwe wegas,
> baþian brimfuglas,   **brædan feþra**,
> hreosan **hrim** ond snaw,   **hagle** gemenged.

> Then the friendless man awakens,
> sees before himself the tawny waves,
> the sea-birds bathing, **their feathers spreading**,
> **rime** and snow falling, mingled with **hail**.

We easily apprehend the Wanderer's grief; but the language is also tinged with the cues of Óðinn's Storm—the spreading feathers, the rime, and hail—and the tenor of this battle idiom in this context would make his reaction, his heavier spirit, all the more poignant. The tableau of hail-strewn birds spreading feathers might summon flickerings of battle, memories of or longings for combat in the company of his king and companions.

To understand the presence of Óðinn's Storm in the *Siege* passage, we can trace the selected features of the broader stylization, specifically its usage of the "dinning-earth" and "shaking"-item motifs. I will argue that the "dimming" sky of the *Siege*-passage represents a scribal refashioning—by way of minim-cluster confusion—of the "dinning-earth" motif so often found in the Óðinn's Storm site, and that its companion image of "feather-shaking" birds is an attempt to reanimate the birds-at-rest with the more kinetic model and resonant "word-power" of Óðinn's Storm.

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[9] See, for instance, Watson 1998a.

Dimming Sky, Dinning Earth

By the early Middle English era, the "dinning-earth" motif was a time-honored expression in the Germanic alliterative tradition, but its poetic force was becoming dissipated. In its various Middle English forms (attested to in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [*MED*: dinen v.(1)])—*dined*, *dinned*, *dynet*, *dened*, *dunede*, *dunnede*—the verb *dunien* would have often presented scribes with an ambiguous cluster of ligating minims, e.g., dʃʃʃʃede. Along the continuum of reperformance, such ambiguity brings forth a scribal invention: *dunede* coalesces and eventually produces the *dimede* variant. This formulaic "evolution" is readily seen when we survey the "dinning-earth" motif in Old Norse and Old English and then follow its course in the Middle English era.

Among the earliest examples of the "dinning-earth" motif are those found in Old Norse verse, where the stylized feature is typically linked with hero-journeys into mythological landscapes: Óðinn crossing to Hel; Loki to Ásgarth; Gunnar's men passing through the unknown Mirkwood. As we would expect, the "dinning-earth" motif is flexible, but it is underpinned by those stock linguistic markers that likely keyed the theme. Among these frequent markers are ON *dynja*/OE *dynnan* "to resound" and OE *hryssan*/ON *hrista* "to shake or tremble," as the following examples can demonstrate. In *Baldrs draumar* the earth resounds as Óðinn approaches the fortress of Hel (*Bdr*. 3.3): [10]

> Fram reið Óðinn, **foldvegr dunði,**
> hann kom at hávo Heliar ranni.
>
> Óðinn rode on, **the earth dinned**;
> he came to the tall hall of Hel.

The account of Gunnar's horse-troop riding to Atli's court in *Atlakviða* illustrates a kindred stylization of the "dinning-earth" motif, one that prefers the verb *hrista* "to shake" to *dynja* (13.1-4):

> Fetom léto frœcnir   um fiöll atþyria
> marina mélgreypo,   Myrcvið inn ókunna;
> **hristiz öll Húnmörk**, þar er harðmóðgir fóro,
> ráco þeir vannstyggva völlo allgrœna.
>
> The brave ones put to pace their bit-champing steeds

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[10] All references to the Poetic *Edda* are from Kuhn 1983; poem, stanza, and line are given.

along the mountain-path, the unknown Mirkwood.
All Hunmark shook, where the grim-spirited ones went.
They coursed their horses over vales all-green.

So, too, when Loki flies to Ásgarth, the home of the Giants, we find a variation on the "dinning-earth" theme: it is stated twice, in stanzas five and nine of *Þrymskviða*, that his *fjaðarhamr* "feather-coat" resounds *(Þrk* 5.1, 9.1):

Fló þa Loki,   **fiaðarhamr dunði**

Loki flew then, **his feather-coat dinned**.

The Old Norse examples place the feature in a stylized and mythological world that has a cognate representation in Old English verse, in heroic poems such as *Beowulf* and *Finnsburh*. The representations, however, are less specifically tied to a hero's journeying; yet, like the Norse examples, they can lend a certain textual vibrato that either precedes imminent conflict or signals the tumult of high battle. The verb *dynnan* occurs three times in *Beowulf*, and once in the *Finnsburh* fragment.

When the dragon first spews fire from its cave, the dinning-earth motif accompanies the action (2556b-58): [11]

        From ǣrest cwōm
oruð āglǣcean   ūt of stāne,
hāt hildeswāt;   **hrūse dynede**.

The monster's breath came first out of the stone(-barrow),
hot battle-sweat; **the earth resounded**.

The other occurrences feature a hall-for-earth substitution, but the essential quality—as denoted in the verb—remains. Thus, when Beowulf and Grendel grapple, it is said that Heorot clamors (767a):

Dryhtsele **dynede**.

The hall **resounded**.

And when Beowulf strides across the floor to greet an inconsolable Hrothgar (who has lost his loyal thane Æschere to Grendel's mother) the rattling floors signal his heroic stature (1317b):

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[11] All references to *Beowulf* and *Finnsburh* are taken from Klaeber 1950.

Healwudu **dynede**.

The hall-wood **dinned**.

The *Finnsburh* invocation of the "dinning-earth" motif occurs in the high-battle section of the poem, a scene that, as I have argued recently (2002), is explicitly linked to Óðinn and the valkyries (28 and30b):[12]

Ða wæs on healle   wælslihta gehlyn:
. . .   Buruh-ðelu **dynede**.

Then was the clatter of slaughter in the hall
. . .   the hall-floor **dinned**.

By the early Middle English era there is evidence that the "dinning earth" motif was becoming a less effective formula. Laȝamon, for instance, can summon the motif in phrases reminiscent of the Norse horse-journeys cited above (10593, 13658):[13]

His hors he lette irnan   **þat þa eorðe dune(de)**.

He let his horse run, **so that the earth dinned**.

Steden lepen   **sturede þa eorðe**.

The steeds leap, **the earth resounded**.

But he struggles with what I will call "literalization," a growing need to justify the image in denotative (or literal) terms rather than in connotative terms. For example, what takes a single dragon in *Beowulf* takes sixty thousand trumpeting men in *Brut*; and this difference reflects a growing self-consciousness of the inherited idiom, an increased sense of having to account for its presence, as may be seen in the following excerpt (13696-702):

Ða gon þat folc sturien   þa eo[r]ðen gon to dunien
bemen þer bleowen   bonneden ferden

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[12] The *Finnsburh* passages presented in this essay are based on Donald Fry's 1974 edition, but incorporate the recent editorial recommendations of Watson's "The *Finnsburh* Skald." On this passage, see Watson 2002:506.

[13] All *Brut* quotations come from Brook and Leslie 1977.

hornes þer aqueðen   mid hæhȝere stefnen
sixti þusende   bleowen to-somne
ma þer aqueðen   of Arðures iueren
þene sixti þusende   segges mid horne
þa wolcne gon to dunien   þa eo[r]ðe gon to biuien.

Then the folk began to stir, the earth to din.
Trumpets were blown, armies arrayed: sixty thousand
horns were sounded together. More of Arthur's
companions rang out there than the sixty thousand men
with horns. **The sky began to din, the earth to shake**!

There is other evidence here that the traditional referentiality of the phrase is weakening. Laȝamon must use a more insistent style, repeating the feature three times in this passage in varied forms: "þa eo[r]ðen gon to dunien" (13696); "þa wolcne gon to dunien" (13702); and "þa eo[r]ðe gon to biuien" (13702). Thus the feature has required not only a more "literal" element—a true army (60,000 men) to shake the earth—but also a more heavy-handed presence: Laȝamon *wants* to inject this feature into his narrative, but to do so he must be more emphatic, more persistent. It is also significant here that Laȝamon includes the sky as part of the formulaic fabric of the "dinning-earth" motif ("þa wolcne gon to dunien"). Such usage, along with minim confusion, will encourage the transformation of this image by later reperforming scribes.

If in Laȝamon's *Brut* the idiom is becoming depleted, in later texts it becomes increasingly unfamiliar and unproductive. As this formulaic theme develops along the oral-literate continuum, it grows increasingly remote to scribal culture, resulting in a transformation catalyzed by minim-cluster confusion. In reading and processing their script, some scribes appear to confuse the intended graphemes of the word *dunnede*—its minim cluster— and produce *dimmede/dymmede*. As a consequence, the formula gets repackaged as the "dimming-earth or dimming-sky motif"; in short, the image evolves. The A and D manuscripts of the *Wars of Alexander* preserve the evolving image in a stylized rendering of Alexander's first battle, a pageant of men and horses "stamping" and "stirring" (A:781-82; D:781-82):[14]

A:
Quat of stamping of stedis & stering of bernes,
all dymed þe dale & þe dust ryses.

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[14] Skeat 1886 is the source for all quotations from *The Wars of Alexander*.

From the stamping of the steeds and stirring of men,
all dimmed the dale, the dust rising.

D:
What of stampyng of stedes & strippyng of baners,
all demmyd þe dale   & þe dust risez.

From the stamping of steeds and unfurling of banners,
all dimmed the dale, the dust rising.

Laʒamon's "dinning-earth" diction in his invocation of galloping horses and the "stirring" of men (cf. above, "þa gon þat folc sturien þa eo[r]ðen gon to dunien") can suggest continuity with the *Alexander*-poet's phrasing. Yet the traditional material has been repackaged with new, or less conventional, details, such as the rising dust (and unfurling of banners in D).

    Though it may be a purposeful addition, the unfurling banners ("strippying of baners") reads more as an exchangeable image, a formulaic variation, especially with its sonic and syllabic agreement with Scribe-A's phrase "stering of bernes." Its presence suggests that there is a tension here between oral and literate significations, as is evident in the balance of essential and exchangeable ideas. On the one hand, we have a shifting field of denotative images (men stirring and banners unfurling), suggesting that what remains productive is the resonant phrase of antiquity: the presence of dinning/dimming fields invokes a traditionally charged affective context, while the denotative images—the steeds, warriors, and banners—are flexible, or exchangeable, a phenomenon that is typical of the oral-derived style. As we have seen in the Lawman's *Brut* example of the "dinning-earth" motif, the stamping of steeds and stirring of warriors produces a vibrating earth and sky. Yet the new image of the "dimming field" seems to present problems for scribes. Why is the field darkening? The added detail of rising dust, which does not appear part of the traditional package, may be a response to the "dimming" dale image: an example of scribal invention. Confronted with this new image (which has been generated in part by minim confusion) the scribes proceed to embellish the image so as to justify the darkening dale—a justification demanded by their and their audiences' increasingly literate interpretive strategies. This increased sense of "literalization," this movement toward denotative precision, is consistent with a literary reflex, as well as with a movement away from a connotative, traditionally deployed register.

    The revised image of the "dimming dale" (e.g., "all dymed þe dale") can also support the case for syncretism between "dimming" and "dinning." While the *Siege* passage under consideration prefers "dym[m]ed þe skyes"

to "dymed þe dale," a related occurrence of "dymedyn" in an earlier *Siege* passage brings forth the underlying tensions between the like verbs and their phrases (531-32):

> Doust drof vpon lofte, dymedyn **alle aboute**,
> as þonder & þicke rayn, þrowolande in skyes.

>   A: **the dale**

> Dust drove on high, dimming **all things about**,
> as thunder and thick rain, jostling in the skies.

Interestingly, the scribal tension falls not on "dymeden" here but on the variable phrase "alle aboute" and "the dale."   A passage from the late fourteenth-century *The Destruction of Troy* suggests the fused rhetoric between the "dimming sky" and "dinning-earth" motifs—their patterns of interference (1197-98):

> **All dynnet þe dyn the dales Aboute**
> when helmes and hard stele hurlet to-gedur.

> **All dinned the din throughout the dales**
> when the helmets and hard steel crashed together.

The *Troy* expression not only highlights the formulaic proximity of "dales" and "aboute," justifying the variation in *Siege*, but also raises the prospect of "dymedyn" (with its final "dyn" component) as a smoothed and minim- istically produced form of "dynnet þe dyn." Whatever we decide here, the images that accrue about the "dimming sky and dale," particularly that of the rising dust, seem to be non-traditional details—added to make sense of the strangely "dimming" field for a more literal-minded audience.

   The confusion of minim-clusters would seem to be a catalyst, then, for the evolution of new images. In the transmission of texts, scribes combine ambiguous minim-clusters in unintended ways and then may elaborate in order to justify the new formation. Though it is difficult to say precisely what is elaboration, we can see further "minim-istic" tension in at least one other moment in the Jerusalem siege. In a striking image, shields either "shiver" (i.e., split) or "shimmer" according to how each scribe interprets the minim package (547-48):

> For schyueryng of she[l]des & schynyng of helmes
> hit ferde, as alle þe firmament vp-on a fur wer.

> EDU: schymeryng "shimmering"
>
> A: schemerynge "shimmering"

> From the splitting of shields and shining of helmets,
> it was as if all the firmament were afire.

Though the orthography above varies from my reconstruction below, a minim-cluster could have, at some point, spawned the confusion that underlies these two forms and motifs:

> sh∫∫∫∫ering

In context the "shivering" helmets appear misplaced, as "shimmering" ones would contribute more readily to the fiery firmament. Remarkably, the *Siege* phrasing and alliterative patterning is reminiscent of lines 35b-36 of the *Finnsburh* fragment ("Swurdlēoma stōd, / swylce eal Finnsburuh fȳrenu wǣre"; "Sword-gleam shone, as if all Finnsburh were aflame"), providing further evidence of the conservative and resilient nature of these traditional native idioms.[15] A closer look at the phrasing bears out a surprising parallel:

> *Siege*: Hit ferde, as alle þe firmament vp-on a fur wer.
> *Finn.*:   swylce eal Finnsburuh fȳrenu wǣre.

Despite the more than five hundred years separating these utterances, the syntactical and metrical correspondences are spot on: "as alle" and "swylce eal"; the three-syllable lilt of "firmament" and "Finnsburuh"; the syntactical (post-object verb) match of "vp-on a fur wer" and "fyrenu wære." Indeed, in the *Siege* line, one can still hear the music of the Old English meter.

The Birds of Battle

To understand the *Siege* battle-birds caught in flux—at once resting and at the same time shaking—one needs to acknowledge the flexible contexts in which the dinning/dimming earth idiom participates, the broader patterns of Óðinn's Storm. As suggested above by Loki's "dinning feathercoat" ("fiaðarhamr dunði"), the essential ideas of a dinning-item and

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[15] On *Finnsburh* 35b-36, see Watson 2000:516.

feather-shaking seem to participate in a shared substitutional field—a common formulaic locus. A brief survey of related occurrences lets us extend our understanding of this formulaic collocation and its associative field. A passage from the Old English poem *Judith* features a collocation of *dynedan* and the lexeme *feþera*, as part of the compound *urigfeþera* "dewy-feathered" (Dobbie 1953, *Jud.*:204b-16a):

> **Dynedan scildas**,
> hlude hlummon. Þæs se hlanca gefeah
> wulf in wald, ond se **wan**na hrefn,
> wælgifre fugel. Wistan begen
> þæt him þa þeodguman þohton tilian
> fylle on fægum; ac him fleah on last
> earn ætes georn, **urigfeþera**,
> salowigpada sang hildeleoð,
> hyrnednebba. Stopon heaðorincas,
> beornas to beadowe, bordum beðeahte,
> hwelfum lindum, þa ðe hwile ær
> elþeodigra edwit þoledon,
> hæðenra hosp.

> **Shields dinned**, resounded loudly. Of this the
> lean wolf in the wood rejoiced, and the **wan** raven,
> the slaughter-eager bird. Both knew that the warriors
> intended to provide them with a feast of fallen ones.
> But the eagle, greedy for food, flew behind, **dewy-feathered**
> and dark-coated, singing a war-cry—the horny-beaked one!
> The warriors advanced, soldiers to battle, carrying shields,
> curved linden wood, those who had previously suffered the
> shame of foreigners, the reproach of the heathen.

Though typically read as a "Beasts of Battle" motif, the passage might more productively be seen as participating in the broader narrative locus of Óðinn's Storm, of which dewy-feathered or shaking beasts can be a crucial part. The passage serves as a battle preamble, and it encodes its threatening environment through a lexemic pool rather than a stock imagistic one. Hence, we find in Óðinn's Storm passages in which the images are exchangeable: the earth might din, shields might din; birds, horses, or wolves might shake or be covered with dew; ravens or the sky might be wan. What seems more crucial is the presence of clustered lexemes: *dyneden*, *deawig*, *feðera*, and *wan*. These words taste of context. It is for this reason that the "Beasts of Battle" motif does not really fit as a label, because the beasts themselves are ultimately expendable.

For instance, we find these typical "Beasts" passages in the following Old English passages:[16]

Hreopan herefugolas, hilde grædig,
deawigfeðere   ofer drihtneum,
wonn wælceasega. (*Exodus* 162-65a)

The war-birds shrieked, greedy for battle,
dewy feathered over the warriors,
the **dusky** valkyries.

          Sang se **wan**na fugel
under deoreð**sceaft**um,   **deawigfeðera**,
hræs on wenan. (*Genesis A* 1983b-85a)

          The **dusky** bird sang,
under the darted **spears**,   **dewy-feathered**,
in expectation of slaughter.

Ðær wearð hream ahafen,   hremmas **wundon**,
earn æses georn;   wæs **on eorþan cyrm**. (*Maldon* 106-7)

There a scream rose up, ravens **circled**,
the eagle was eager for food; **clamor** was **on the land**.

The stylized diction of these "beasts" passages leaves us with a potential word-core of lexemes for keying the "Beasts" theme, which might include *wan*, *deawigfeðera*, *wundon*, *ofer drihtneum*, and *sceaft*. Yet in the following passage from *Exodus*, no beast is found within two hundred lines (342-44):

þridde þeodmægen   (þufas **wundon**
ofer garfare)   guðcyste onþrang
deawig sceaftum.

The third army—battle standards **twisted**
over the spear-company—pressed on in a select band
with **dewy spearshafts**.

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[16]   The *Exodus* and *Genesis* passages are taken from Krapp 1931. *Maldon* is excerpted from Dobbie 1942.

Instead of ravens, standards wind over head; instead of dew-covered birds, dew-covered spears accompany the soldiers. Has the "Beasts" motif been invoked? It has not if we insist on Francis P. Magoun's famous standard: "the mention of a wolf, eagle, and/or raven as beasts attendant on a scene of carnage."[17] But the *Exodus* passage, I would propose, does key the ominous battle-preamble Óðinn's Storm, of which the beasts are often—but not necessarily—a part. The beasts are close by in the *Exodus* dewy-spear passage; however, they linger in the deep structure, in the lexemes' traditional referentiality—not in the surface articulation.

The question of the "Beasts" is important for the *Siege*-birds at hand. Indeed, it is tempting to align the feather-shaking *Siege*-birds with the Old English "Birds of Battle" prototype; yet, in doing so, we should be cautious, acknowledging that the bird-"beasts" participate in a larger, flexible formulaic system, a system that is more clearly articulated in the *Siege*-passage. I think we do better to locate the birds in a continuum of text, in the stylized action and network of poetic diction in which they are implicated. A further sampling of shaking-animal passages can deepen this sense of continuum, action, and diction. In Eddic verse, for instance, valkyries perch on the edge of battle as their horses shake (*hristuz*) dew and hail from their manes; in skaldic verse, an eagle is said to shake his bloody feathers in the fury of battle:

> Marir **hristuz**, stóð af mönom þeira
> **dögg** í diúpa dali
> hagl í háva viþo. (Kuhn 1983:*HHj*. 28.3-5)

> Horses **shook**, from their manes
> there came **dew** in deep dales,
> **hail** in tall woods.

> Valgammr **skók** í vápna rimmu
> viðr Helganes blóðugt **fiðri**. (Kock 1946-50:I, 157; 15.5-6)

> The slaughter-vulture [eagle] **shook** in the weapon fray
> near Helganess its bloody **feathers**.

This time-honored battle-shake, which typically features horses, birds, or wolves, finds its course into Middle English verse. An example from *King Horn* places the resilient stylization in the mid-thirteenth century, when it

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[17] Magoun 1955:83. For important recent discussions of the "Beasts of Battle" typescene see Griffith 1993 and Foley 1991:224-31.

collocates with the "dinning-earth" motif. As Horn prepares for battle, arming himself and fetching his steed, the poet invokes in swift terms the metonymically charged feature (Hall 1901:34, 605-6):

His fole **schock** his brenye
þat al þe court gan **denye**.

His horse **shook** his corselet
so that all the court began **to din**.

The "shaking" and "dinning" collocation preferred by the two *Siege*-scribes, then, taps into this school of oral-derived rhetoric. But the *Siege*-passage also has a "literary" history, to which the other scribes who favor a "resting bird" adhere—a literary indebtedness to *Troy* and ultimately Guido de Colonne's *Historia Troiana*.

The source of the *Troy*-passage, Guido de Colonne's *Historia Troiana*, tells of Agamemnon gathering with his council in his tent on a star-lit night—there is no mention of birds. If this is the invention of the *Troy*-poet, then, the original image is of birds coming to rest, folding their feathers in the still and starry evening. The scene is clearly intended as a restful one. Confronted with such an image, the *Siege*-scribes (AL) who offer the "dinning" sky and the feather-shaking bird must have reprocessed and reperformed the "literate" text: the two scribes superimpose an oral-derived feature on the borrowed section of text, reanimating the birds with their war-like rustle. As stated above, their language points toward their sphere of influence: the verb *rysten* (Scribe A) is the descendent of ON *hrista*/OE *rusien*, and, as demonstrated, would encode a specialized, affective usage. Its variant *rusken* (Scribe L) is akin to Swedish *ruska* "to shake," Old Danish *ruske* "to rattle," and (Middle) Danish *ruske* "to shake" (the *MED* reads the phrase as "to ruffle [its feathers]"). Though not cited in the *MED*, Old Norse *ryskja* "to shake vigorously" might well be its Scandinavian source.

We can conclude that the scribal divergence results from two rival readings of the scene: flanked between the close of one battle and the start of the next, the scene is ambivalent, functioning either as a tranquil pause following the fighting or as a herald of the future battle. The scribes get caught somewhere in between (as reified in *Siege*-Scribe L's *dymned*), breaking into two camps depending on their understanding of the motif. For those scribes who animate the bird, the scribal process is essentially the *obverse* of the customary oral-to-written configuration: instead of the "literatization" of a decaying oral image, we have the "oralization" of a single (presumably written) source. Subtle tensions like *dymned* suggest the

complex turf war between rival registers, and can offer a fascinating picture of the oral-literate continuum in flux—the ebb and flow of literacy and orality.

The *Siege* passage, then, is no mere literary borrowing. Indeed, to understand the passage as such is reductive: it silences the contingent scribal tensions, the resonant voices that both inscribe and depart from the traditional alliterative rhetoric. In the rival portraits of night falling in *Siege*—the dimming night and restful birds or the resounding sky and fluttering birds— we see a dynamic hybrid of the oral-derived and the literate, the fusion of connotative and denotative strategies. But we also see a fracturing "performance matrix," to borrow John Miles Foley's term, in which scribes exhibit varying competencies in deploying the traditional rhetoric along the oral-literate continuum. By the fifteenth century, residual orality still persists, yet its eroding architecture—its words, phrases, and type-scenes—has become subject to new combinations through scribal mis-reading of minim clusters and a growing sense of literalization: an increased interest in justifying the presence of the traditional language. Such tensions seem embodied in the L-scribe's word *dymned*, a fused form caught between a literary evocation and a connotative inscription. Is the sky both resounding and darkening? It would seem to be just one example of how scribes, even as late as the fifteenth century, could harmonize competing voices.[18]

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[18] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 Modern Language Association Conference in Washington, D. C.

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