



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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## Heroic Register, Oral Tradition, and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*

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The Middle English *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (the *Morte* henceforth) begins with an appeal by the poet for his audience to listen to him as he tells his tale, thus asking them to focus on the aurality of his words. The poet implies an audience that is present in the telling, using first-person plural pronouns and mentioning the need for silence while the tale takes shape. By doing so, the poet highlights the centrality of speech in the heroic narrative about to ensue and invokes a particular performance frame, one that will be “keyed” by various aspects familiar to an audience fluent in the tradition.<sup>1</sup> Of primary importance to this framing are both the alliterative meter and the nature of character speech, and it is my contention that this performance frame marks the text as heroic in the same vein as Old English heroic poetry, signaling a way to “read”<sup>2</sup> the text that gives meaning to events that might be confusing for a modern audience, such as the two deaths of the Roman Emperor Lucius.

The *Morte* is an alliterative poem—a member of the so-named “Alliterative Revival,” a fourteenth-century poetic movement that employed the alliterative meter rather than the contemporary syllabic/rhyme-based verse form of Chaucer and other court poets.<sup>3</sup> Its subject matter concerns King Arthur’s wars with the Roman Empire, his betrayal by Mordred, and his subsequent death, and, as is the case for a large number of these alliterative poems, it is usually categorized as a romance.<sup>4</sup> Though much has been debated about the nature of the alliterative

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauman addresses the idea of framing a verbal performance, citing several aspects that can “key” or signal such a performance to an audience versed in the tradition. Among these keys are parallelism, special codes, figurative language, special formulae, and appeals to tradition (1977:16).

<sup>2</sup> John Miles Foley, in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, explains the difficulty of defining “reading” based only on textual models: “Reading is complex. It names a diverse set of practices across the geographical and chronological expanse of human activity. It cannot be portrayed as any single practice without disenfranchising dozens of cultures, without disenfranchising out of existence a healthy percentage of possible ‘ways of taking’ from texts” (2002:74). In the case of the alliterative romances, a “way of taking” from the texts, I argue, is to understand that gaps are filled in by the traditional knowledge that an audience inside the tradition would already have access to simply by familiarity with the heroic register.

<sup>3</sup> For a more complete discussion of the debate surrounding the poems of the Alliterative Revival and their continued poetics, see Pearsall 1982; Oakden 1968; Turville-Petre 1977; and Cable 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Romance as a genre is fluid in its definitions. It will be beyond the scope of this article to engage with the various definitions and points of argument. For my purposes, I am working with the broad idea that a romance is a text that engages with chivalric behavior and knighthood.

verse itself—whether the poetics is a natural evolution from that of Old English poetry<sup>5</sup> or is significantly different and thus evidence of a disconnect in the tradition—the more important question, I would argue, is why these poems warrant the alliterative meter at all. What is it about their content that calls for a certain frame of reference that the alliterative meter provides, whether or not the tradition is continuous or revived?

For me, the answer to that question lies in a two-tiered process by which the Germanic heroic register is activated, the meter being the first key in establishing the particular communication mode for the audience. Harkening back to a pre-Conquest poetics, the alliteration situates the poem as one participating in a tradition older than those Anglo-Norman romances based on ideas of *fin'amor* (“fine love,” that is, “courtly love”). In this case, the alliteration signals that, even though the poem belongs to the post-Conquest romance tradition, Old English oral poetics will nonetheless be utilized as a significant mode of communication in the exchange. As John Miles Foley explains, “entering the performance arena means opening a specific, dedicated channel for communicating and participating in a focused kind of exchange” (1999:23). Alliteration on its own, however, is insufficient to establish the particular register, since alliterative meter in Old English verse was of course used for all poetry and not limited to heroic contexts. Other aspects (such as heroic modes of speaking<sup>6</sup>) will signal that the *Morte* is not primarily a religious poem or one of the other types of poems encountered in Old English. Rather, it will be more specifically heroic in its thematic content. The meter thus functions to prepare an audience familiar with the oral tradition to enter into a performance arena with expectations based on Old English oral poetics, but, in order to stress the heroic nature of this exchange, the arena must be more specifically keyed by the use of character speech-acts throughout the poem.

With the general frame of Old English tradition established by the alliterative verse, the distinctly heroic register is first signaled by the poet’s direct address to the audience. A similar direct address begins the Old English poem *Beowulf*. As has been discussed by Foley (1991:214-23), the *Hwæt* paradigm signals a heroic episode and comprises three main features: *Hwæt*, a verb of aurality/orality (usually one of hearing), and the use of a first-person pronoun (often plural in order to include the audience). Like the *Beowulf* poet’s beginning lines (ll. 1-3):<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some recent studies have focused on tracing the alliterative shift in the poems of the fourteenth century back to Old English poetics; see, for instance, Bredehoft 2005. However, it is beyond the scope of this investigation to address the specific metrical workings of the alliterative lines in both Old and Middle English poetry. For a discussion of Old English meter more generally, see Russom 1987 and Creed 1966. In terms of the form, the alliteration in Middle English does not seem to function in exactly the same way as its Old English relative, which relies on stress patterns rather than syllabic ones. Old English poetic meter is structured around four primary stresses per line, three of which were guided by alliteration. This function is seemingly absent from the poems of the Alliterative Revival. For discussion of alliterative verse and Anglo-Saxon oral-formulaic composition, see also Lord 1960; Foley 1990; O’Brien O’Keeffe 1990; Niles 1983; Renoir 1988.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of heroic genres of speaking, including commands and flyting, as applied to the *Iliad* specifically, see Martin 1989.

<sup>7</sup> The Old English for this article follows the conventions used in the fourth edition of Klaeber’s *Beowulf* (Fulk et al. 2008), without the use of macrons or indication of half-line breaks. Middle English quotations are taken from Benson and Foster 1994. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum,  
 þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon,  
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon

Listen, we have heard of the glory of the spear-Danes, of the people kings, how the nobles performed (deeds of) courage.

the poet of the *Morte* also invokes the audience through the use of the first-person plural (ll. 1-6):

Now grete glorious God through grace of Himselven  
 And the precious prayer of his pris Moder  
 Sheld us fro shamesdeede and sinful workes  
 And give us grace to guie and govern us here  
 In this wretched world through virtuous living  
 That we may kaire til his court, the kingdom of heven. . . .

Now the great glorious God through his own grace and the precious prayer of his excellent mother shield us from shameful deeds and sinful works and give us grace to guide and to govern us here in this wretched world, through virtuous living that we may go to his court, the kingdom of heaven. . . .

As shown by the use of “us” in lines 3 and 4, the poet does not pray to God on his own behalf but on behalf of his audience. He then further heightens their role by directly addressing the audience and instructing them as to how they should behave in hearing the tale (ll. 12-16):

Ye that lust has to lithe or loves for to here  
 Of elders of olde time and of their awke deeds,  
 How they were lele in their law and loved God Almighty  
 Herkenes me hendely and holdes you stille,  
 And I shall tell you a tale that trew is and noble.

You who desire to listen or loves to hear of elders of old times and of their strange deeds, how they were loyal in their law and loved God Almighty, hearken to me courteously and hold yourselves still, and I shall tell you a tale that is true and noble.

As with the Old English heroic poem, the poet here assumes audience complicity and knowledge of the deeds he will relate. Notice that his opening appeal also references the deeds of these elders from olden times, just as the noble deeds of the Spear-Danes from days of old function to set the stage in *Beowulf*. This opening thus frames the performance, setting parameters for the audience members who agree to read this poem as a heroic text similar to *Beowulf*, the audience members themselves becoming the “us” who are to be blessed and the “you” the poet envisions.

The *Morte*'s close alignment with the heroic oral tradition can largely be seen through its extensive use of character speech-acts<sup>8</sup> that resonate through their Old English models. The poem is alive with *beots*,<sup>9</sup> commands, and instances of naming, all of which anchor the poem firmly in a heroic oral tradition even though the text was produced during a time of growing literacy in England.<sup>10</sup> Chief among these speech-acts is the *beot*: for the *beots* issued at the beginning of the poem create end events that are often difficult for modern scholars to explain and engage with, such as the perceived two deaths of the Emperor Lucius, an event that is often avoided or glossed over by scholars.<sup>11</sup> However, as we shall see, because the *beot* to strike down Lucius is established twice—once through a collection of knights representing King Arthur himself and again through Lancelot, a heroic figure known in the Arthurian tradition not only for his betrayal of the king with Guinevere as evidenced in the Anglo-Norman tradition but also for his prowess in battle—the promised action must be fulfilled not once, but twice.

The relevant *beot* sequence follows the opening scene of the *Morte* where a banquet is being held during the Christmastime holiday.<sup>12</sup> As the knights are preparing for their feast, delegates from the Roman Emperor Lucius enter, demanding the tribute they claim Arthur owes to the Empire. What ensues is a chorus of *beots* in support of King Arthur. All of his knights, beginning with the oldest, most esteemed among them such as Sir Cador, “counsel” Arthur through their pledges—vows in martial support of the King should he choose to wage war against Lucius. These vows as a collective empower Arthur and enable him to seek war, thereby creating the action to follow as Arthur will depart to march on Rome. But they also function to bind Arthur himself to the specific task of killing Lucius.

But in addition, one particular *beot*, that sworn by Sir Lancelot at lines 372-77, anticipates another important deed that also must be enacted before the end of the poem:

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<sup>8</sup> J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1975:5-6) explains that a speech-act is a spoken utterance that creates an action by means of that utterance, such as the naming of a ship. Though I will be applying this label to written texts, I argue that the speech uttered by the character cannot be effectively separated from the action it creates without destroying the meaning of the action, as with commands and *beots*.

<sup>9</sup> In Old English poetry, the *beot* is a promissory speech-act. A character, such as Beowulf, who vows to perform an action will fulfill that vow if he is a heroic character. An example is Beowulf's vow to cleanse Heorot of Grendel, whom he does indeed kill. His *beot* fulfills the guidelines outlined by linguist John R. Searle for a promise: that it must be included in a longer discourse and indicate a future event, that the hearer wants the proposed action to take place and it would not occur in the normal chain of events, and that the speaker is sincere and sees the promise as an obligation (1986:67-69). *Beots* in Old English fulfill all of these requirements, as does the *beot* in the *Morte*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Amodio 2004. Amodio's work examines how remnants of oral tradition survive in a culture that becomes more literate and more strongly influenced by continental practices after the Norman Conquest. He argues that one should remember that the “termini” of “purely oral” and “purely literate” are theoretical and civilizations exist somewhere along the continuum, not at the “loci termini” (2004:4).

<sup>11</sup> Summaries of the poem often merely state that Lucius is slain (not mentioning the two occurrences) as is the case in Valerie Krishna's introduction to her verse translation: “Finally, the battle with the Emperor takes place. On the field Arthur's knights fulfill the vows they had made at the council; Lucius is slain, and Arthur is victorious” (1983:xv). In an earlier article, Krishna also notes that the repetitious language of the poem has often “caused critics some unease” (1982:74). In the edition of Benson and Foster an endnote to the scene merely states: “The emperor evidently recovers very quickly, for he is soon back in battle” (1994:274).

<sup>12</sup> In some respects, this scene also resonates with other oral traditional patterns, as it is also employed as the opening scene for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

“ . . . I shall be at journee with gentle knightes  
 On a jamby steed full jollily graithed,  
 Ere any journee begin to joust with himselven  
 Among all his giauntes, Genivers and other,  
 Strike him stiffly fro his steed with strenghe of mine handes,  
 For all the steren in stour that in his stale hoves!”

“ . . . I shall be at the day’s fight with noble knights on an active steed full jollily equipped, and before any battle begins, to joust with Lucius himself among all his giants, Genoese and other kinds, (and) strike him stoutly from his steed with the strength of my hands, before all his strong ones who remain in his troop in the battle!”

Lancelot’s vow to “strike him stiffly . . . with strenghe of mine handes” creates the action that he later performs, though it must likewise be King Arthur who kills Lucius. The poet, aware of the binding nature of these traditional vows and their inseparability from the actions to come, later narrates both of these forecast events in the battle scene accordingly, a technique both typical and acceptable in oral traditional “texts.” First, we have Lancelot who spies Lucius in a vulnerable position. He rides forward and strikes him as promised (ll. 2073-80):

Now buskes Sir Launcelot and braides full even  
 To Sir Lucius the lord and lothly him hittes;  
 Through paunce and plates he perced the mailes  
 That the proud pensel in his paunch lenges!  
 The hed hailed out behind an half foot large,  
 Through hawberk and haunch with the hard wepen;  
 The steed and the steren man strikes to the ground,  
 Strak down a standard and to his stale wendes!

Now Sir Lancelot hurries and pulls up even with Sir Lucius. He loathly hits him; through the stomach guard and plates of armor he pierced the mail with the proud pennon, lodges it in his stomach! The head (of the pennon) sticks out a half foot behind him, through the hauberk and haunch with the hard weapon; the steed and stern man Lancelot strikes to the ground, struck down a standard and his stale company.

Lancelot executes his vow at this moment, striking down Lucius in completion of the speech-act. The graphic description of his attack suggests that Lucius is indeed dead at this point. After all, he is impaled with the pennon and struck to the ground with his horse. Lancelot has been true to his word and performed the deed that his *beot* promised. But the same is also true for King Arthur himself, who only two hundred lines later kills Lucius anew: “Thus endes the Emperour of Arthure handes” (“Thus dies the Emperor by the hands of Arthur,” l. 2255). Both Arthur and Lancelot have vowed to kill Lucius, and so the heroic framing in concert with the traditional register enables and compels both death events to be narrated, even if from a text-based perspective the dual narration might at first appear redundant.

Of course, I am not arguing that this text and the other romances of the Alliterative Revival are oral-derived texts, an assertion that would be folly. However, by invoking a pre-Conquest poetics through the use of the alliterative meter and by activating the heroic register more specifically through speech-acts that mirror those of Old English heroic verse, the poet effectively creates a performance frame that resonates from the earlier tradition. By doing so, he creates meaning in key scenes such as the death of Lucius, where the audience sees both *beots* by Lancelot and King Arthur come to fruition. It is not a mistake on the part of the poet, but rather an important event that can and must happen because of the traditional significance of the knights' speech-acts. Reading the text of the *Morte* on its own heroic terms, therefore, allows modern audiences to appreciate the fulfillment of such vows rather than criticize the poem as flawed in its portrayal of events.

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