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THE ORALITY OF A SILENT AGE: THE PLACE OF ORALITY IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

ALARIC HALL

Invited to contribute to this volume on the theme of orality in medieval studies, my first reaction was not one of passion.¹ Although much of my research has addressed the evidence of our written texts for areas of culture marginal to those texts, or even for their oral characteristics or strata, I have not made much use *per se* of categories of orality, or its counterpart literacy. What the invitation stimulated, however, was an overdue enquiry as to why. Why have I not found the concept of orality intellectually engaging, or exciting to work with? I argue here that the concept of orality is not currently as heuristically useful as its prominence or breadth of application in medieval literary scholarship would suggest. I focus rather on the suggestion—only one of a range of possible interpretations, which are not mutually exclusive—that we (by which I prototypically mean Western scholars of recent decades) have seized on

1 In a paper emphasising that oral communication is central even to the highly literate practices of Western scholarship, and for which I have worked to canvass a wide range of scholarly perspectives, it is appropriate that my thanks should be more comprehensive than is customary. I have benefited considerably from the advice of my medievalist friends at Glossa (who provoked this paper) and the Nordic Centre for Medieval Studies (under whose auspices I was able to attend a series of seminars by John Miles Foley while developing it), particularly Jesse Keskiäho and Jaakko Tahkokallio, along with Matti Kilpiö, Roderick McConchie, Sebastiaan Verweij, and Charles West. My thinking on modernity was developed by my fellow participants at the Third Ernst Cassirer Summer School, along with Fabian Schuppert. Finally, my colleagues at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies have also been influential, particularly Tom Campbell, Paula Hohti, Sampsa Hyysalo, and Maria Soukkio.

the orality/literacy axis as a means to negotiate the profound cultural gaps between our worlds and our sources¹. The massive task to which orality has thereby been put has stretched its applicability too far, blurring a range of important distinctions. The orality/literacy axis is, amongst other things, a way to contrast the medieval and the modern without having to perpetuate the twentieth-century rhetoric of “primitive” versus “modern”, but it may, in some respects, nonetheless be perpetuating modernist ideas of primitivity and modernity. This, of course, is a big claim, which I cannot discuss fully here; rather, I develop one central theme: the problematic role of the orality/literacy axis in negotiating apparent differences between our own rationality and that attested by our medieval texts.

I frame my argument in relation to recent work on the poetry of early Christian England, aiming also to sketch the dominant trends in that field. This focus is apposite because Old English poetry was one of the first and most prominent areas of medieval literature to be affected by new thinking on orality after the Second World War, remaining one of the main foci of work on oral literature generally. However, although there is not space here to make extensive reference to other historiographical traditions, I also intend my arguments to have a wider relevance. In particular, the historiography of orality in the discipline of early medieval history is very different from its historiography in literary studies. The analytical categories of choice are there not orality but literacy, ritual and, to a growing degree, memory.² This reflects the location of the discipline’s centre of gravity in the Carolingian Empire, in which textual production was overwhelmingly in literary Latin, a factor compounded by the fact that the generation which shaped the emergent history departments of early twentieth-century universities expected undergraduates to begin their studies Latin-literate, and did not situate the acquisition of other languages prominently in their syllabuses. Moreover, medieval Latin literature inherited an Antique literary heritage whose conventions (partly because of the renewed influence of those same conventions on modern scholarly traditions) became important in the modern construction of the text: named authors and *literatim* copying, combined with a uniquely scripture-based ecclesiastical ideology. Unlike Old English poetry, then, these texts rarely provoke questions about the orality of their composition, but do provoke questions about the nature of reading and writing. However, both fields share, whether implicitly or explicitly, an axis of orality/literacy as a major

2 Pace Michael Richter, *The Formation of the Medieval West: Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians*.

tool for interpreting and categorising their material, and it is ultimately this axis which I address here.

Current Directions in the Orality of Old English Poetry

Proceeding from a thesis—that medieval literary production and authority could be understood through the framework of modern scholars’ own literary culture—to an antithesis propounding that much of our written medieval verbal art instead directly reflects oral composition and transmission, we find ourselves today at a point of synthesis.³ Ideas about orality in Old English poetry underwent a convulsive shift in the 1950s and ’60s through the influence of Albert Lord’s concept of oral-formulaic poetry.⁴ Showing the similarities between the oral formulaic diction of southern Slavic *guslari* and Old English poetry (pre-eminently *Beowulf*) afforded a remarkable new perspective on the origins and functions of Old English poetic diction. Scholars at this time, however, tended to assume that oral poetic modes were necessarily and profoundly different from literary ones. As Magoun wrote in 1953 in his seminal “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry”,

the recurrence in a given poem of an appreciable number of formulas or formulaic phrases brands the latter as oral, just as a lack of such repetitions marks a poem as composed in a lettered tradition. Oral poetry, it may safely be said, is composed entirely of formulas, large and small, while lettered poetry is never formulaic.⁵

By contrast, current research shows scholars busily investigating the syncretism and hybridity arising from the interaction of orality and literacy, exhibiting caution on the one hand about the usefulness of concepts of authorship and readership, while also accepting that highly literary poetry can be highly formulaic, dispensing with the older suggestion that a text like *Beowulf* might represent a transcription of an oral performance. The move reflects wider changes in attitudes to early medieval traditional culture: the analytical divide between “pagan” and

3 For a major overview of the field of oral literature, see the special issue of *Oral Tradition*, 18 (2003), available at <<http://oraltradition.org>>; another recent overview, with different emphases from my own, is afforded by Mark C. Amodio, “Introduction: Unbinding Proteus” in *New Directions in Oral Theory*, esp. 1–6.

4 The seminal works being Francis P. Magoun, Jr. “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry”; Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.

5 Magoun, 446–47.

“Christian” Anglo-Saxon culture, for example, is closely linked to the historiography of orality and literacy, but has largely been abandoned in favour of approaches whose frame of reference might rather be summed up as an axis of traditional/innovative.⁶

Thus the current synthesis amounts to a return towards more traditional forms of analysis, albeit informed and greatly influenced by a changed intellectual context and background assumptions. The point may be illustrated by a spirited effort to reinterpret the methods of medieval scribes of vernacular poetry as showing “residual orality” exemplified by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe’s *Visible Song*, published in 1990: in this approach, the textual instability observed in oral traditions was taken as a paradigm through which to interpret variation between different manuscripts of written vernacular texts.⁷ Moving away from the ideas of classical textual criticism, which sought to reconstruct original, authorial texts, variations between manuscript copies began to be interpreted as products of a practice of scribal recomposition which reflected how oral poets might retell a story—a “residual orality” in Anglo-Saxon scribal culture. O’Keeffe’s reading reflects medievalists’ burgeoning appreciation of the importance of manuscript studies and what has come to be termed “scribal performance”. But it also seems to be on the back foot: rather than making the producers of Anglo-Saxon texts more oral, more recent work again has made them more literate. Most of our long Old English poems are free translations of Latin sources, and now even the long-mooted idea that *Beowulf*’s dragon-fight shows influence from Latin saints’ lives has received convincing support.⁸ Discounting plain errors, the changes which copyists were most likely to make to poetry was to alter spelling to reflect their own local conventions; more substantial recomposition is much rarer.⁹ Where we can see substantial recomposition, in parallel passages of

6 A key study in this area was Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf-Charms in Context*; my own contribution develops these approaches: *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*. Much criticised, but in some ways nonetheless characteristic, was also James C. Russell, *Germanization of Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*; cf. Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, esp. 140–204, on Scandinavia.

7 *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*.

8 Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues*, whose readings I have developed in “Constructing Anglo-Saxon Sanctity: Tradition, Innovation and Saint Guthlac”, 221–23.

9 For an early criticism of O’Keeffe’s work, see Douglas Moffat, “Anglo-Saxon Scribes and Old English Verse”; also Peter Orton, *The Transmission of Old English Poetry*, 200–208; cf. R. D. Fulk, “On Argumentation in Old English Philology, with Particular Reference to the Editing and Dating of *Beowulf*”, 16–25.

the Old English poems *Daniel* and *Azarias*, Paul G. Remley has argued persuasively for a scribe trying to substitute for illegible text in a damaged exemplar rather than recomposing as a matter of residually oral routine.¹⁰

A range of other developments have also moved our synthesis towards the literary. Traditional criteria for the dating of Old English poetry, built up piecemeal over more than a century, were helpfully called into question in 1980 by Ashley Crandel Amos—but, with a brilliant reinvestigation by R.D. Fulk twelve years later, the prospect of giving relative, and to some extent absolute, dates to our longer Old English poems has been resurrected.¹¹ Accordingly, the idea of ascribing similarities in diction between Old English poems to literary influence as well as shared oral traditions is now gaining prominence, partly through comparison with the similar practices of the undoubtedly highly intertextual, but also highly formulaic, products of Anglo-Latin poets.¹² The prospect of ironic deployments of formulaic diction, more plausible in contexts of reflective writing and reading than on-the-spot composition and real-time aural reception, is likewise finding favour. Formulaic diction is sometimes used in contexts where its literal meaning is incongruous—as when the Danes, giving up hope for Beowulf’s return from Grendel’s *mere* and setting off for home, are referred to as “hwate Scyldingas” (“bold *scyldingas*”, line 1601).¹³ Semantically incongruous formulas in a given text were taken by the oral-formulaic school as a mark of the text’s proximity to oral-formulaic traditions in which such incongruity was an unremarkable bi-product of the mode of composition, but several writers have recently

10 “*Daniel*, the *Three Youths* Fragment and the Transmission of Old English Verse”. Fulk also argued that the almost complete adherence of *Beowulf* to the archaic metrical rules formulated in Kaluza’s Law—which is operative in no other long poem and seems unlikely to have been recognisable by tenth-century Anglo-Saxons, let alone the poem’s eleventh-century scribes—also suggests the stability of its manuscript transmission (“On Argumentation”, 23–24; cf. R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter*, esp. 153–68, 381–92); for the ongoing debate here see B. R. Hutcheson, “Kaluza’s Law, the Dating of *Beowulf*, and the Old English Poetic Tradition”, R. D. Fulk, “Old English Meter and Oral Tradition: Three Issues Bearing on Poetic Chronology”, 317–23.

11 Ashley Crandel Amos, *Linguistic Means of Determining the Dates of Old English Literary Texts*; Fulk, *A History*.

12 See Andy Orchard, “Computing Cynewulf: The *Judith*-Connection”, esp. 76–77; *A Critical Companion to “Beowulf”*, 163–68; cf. Orton, 144–49 on the connection, assumed to be literary, between the Ruthwell Cross inscription and *The Dream of the Rood*.

13 Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 60.

argued that these disjunctions deserve sustained interpretation as deliberately ironic, showing the *Beowulf*-poet self-consciously probing the gap between the rhetoric of the pagan heroic past and its more troubling realities.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Niles and Amodio have recently opposed the idea of Anglo-Saxons as unconscious inheritors of orality in a nascent literate culture. In Niles's words,

what I suspect chiefly motivated the Anglo-Saxons' search for their oral poetic roots was a desire for the simplicity of master/man relations in a world where the actual workings of power were becoming ever more remote and impersonal. At a time when real-life social ties were being subsumed into an impersonal, formalized, state-sponsored bureaucracy, with its systems of coinage and taxation and proxy military service, the desire for spontaneous, personal man-to-man relationships naturally became more pronounced.¹⁵

In this reading, Anglo-Saxons were as much inventors of orality as they were subject to it.

Defining Anglo-Saxon Orality

As this discussion shows, we have reached a nuanced, synthesising stage in the historiography of orality in medieval literature. However, old habits die hard, and there is one which I want to pick up on here, to suggest how the concept of orality—which I have so far discussed as a rather specific heuristic tool of literary criticism—has overflowed into our wider conceptualisations of the medieval past. While explicitly eschewing sharp distinctions between orality and literacy, Mark C. Amodio's recent study of medieval English poetry presented, for heuristic purposes, a prototypical characterisation of oral poetry as “inherently dynamic and ephemeral”, “necessarily composed (and recomposed) under the exigencies of performance”, in which “oral poets are responsible for the unique shape they give to their traditional, inherited materials, but ... stake no claim to any sort of originary status”.¹⁶ The usefulness of this

14 Scott DeGregario, “Theorizing Irony in *Beowulf*: The Case of Hrothgar”; Tom Clark, *A Case for Irony in “Beowulf”, with Particular Reference to its Epithets* (of which the more incisive is DeGregario); cf. E. L. Ridsen, “Irony in *Beowulf*”, 139–49; the essays in Jonathan Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*. For the traditional view, see, for example, John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: from Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*, esp. 195–214.

15 John D. Niles, “The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet”; Mark C. Amodio, “Res(is)ting the Singer: Towards a Non-Performative Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetics”.

16 Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition: Oral Poetics and Literate Culture in Medieval England*, 4, 5, 14.

prototypical definition of oral poetry within Amodio's argumentation is not something which I dispute, but does such poetry really merit characterisation as prototypically *oral*? Is poetry which is composed, without writing, in advance of performance and memorised word for word, or passed down in memorised form from generation to generation, or associated with a named poet, really to be understood as less prototypically oral? The Scandinavian poetic genre of skaldic verse, originating before the conversion to Christianity and the advent of manuscript literacy, includes a large amount of poetry which does not fit Amodio's characterisation at all. Much the same is probably true of similar genres of praise-poetry in early Welsh and Irish. But are these corpora really to be thought of as less prototypically oral than the poetry of Lord's *guslari*? The differences between skaldic verse and the *guslari*'s epic mode are certainly great, from the mechanics of composition and dissemination to their construction of authorial originality, but the axes along which the differences lie are not axes of orality/literacy. When Amodio characterises oral poetry as dynamic and ephemeral, what he is really saying is that dynamic and ephemeral poetry is liable to be oral.

We may return, to elaborate this criticism, to the application of the concept of orality to scribes who adapted poetry as they copied it. Although, as I have said, current estimations of the extent to which Old English poetry was recomposed in transmission are restrained, there are still doubtless texts which show a degree of recomposition, consistent with metrical rules. But why should this practice have attracted the label "residual orality" rather than being seen as characteristic of manuscript literacy? When scholars of late Middle English see that a fifteenth-century monastic copyist of *The Reeve's Tale* replaced Chaucer's statement that Symkyn's wife was "yfostered in a nunnerye" with the less provocative "yfostered in a dairy", they are not seen to show residual orality. They are rather seen as relatively professionalised scribes producing bespoke manuscripts to suit specific readers and listeners.¹⁷ Nor has the tenth- or eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon rewriting, contained in MS Bodleian, Hatton 76, of Wærferth's late ninth-century translation of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (itself represented mainly by MS Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 322), been regarded as evidence for oral practices in manuscript transmission.¹⁸ Current work on medieval Iceland suggests a

17 A. S. G. Edwards, "Manuscripts and Readers", 100–101; cf. Julia Boffey, "From Manuscript to Modern Text",.

18 On which see David Yerkes, *Syntax and Style in Old English: A Comparison of the Two Versions of Wærferth's Translation of Gregory's Dialogues*. For similar work see also Dorothy M. Horgan, "The Lexical and Syntactic Variants Shared by Two of the Later Manuscripts of King Alfred's Translation of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*". For the main work taking oral perspectives on Old English prose see Andy Orchard, "Crying Wolf: Oral Style and the *Sermones Lupi*", cf. "On Editing Wulfstan".

similar analysis. Debate over sagas' orality, after a long period of rather sterile debate followed by an exhausted silence, is again stirring, with strong cases being made for a background for sagas on the subject of Icelanders in orally circulating traditions. But within this movement there is also renewed interest in texts' dating and the development of sagas as literary forms.¹⁹ It is becoming clear that in some cases prose styles traditionally seen as exhibiting more oral features do not represent the earliest codifications of sagas, but instead the outcome of self-conscious textual redaction of more ostentatiously literary works—a historiographical development recalling both Niles's image of Anglo-Saxons seeking the oral poet, and the similar recent arguments for "reoralisation" in the style of Apollonius of Rhodes's epic the *Argonautica*, written in the third century AD.²⁰ Medieval writers were far from naive about the distinctions between written and spoken discourse, and were willing and able to manipulate them, and these conclusions encourage caution about using ideas about oral transmission as a paradigm for interpreting patterns of written transmission, and for labelling them as residually oral.

My scepticism as to the usefulness of the extension of the concept of orality, then, itself in a way represents current trends in work on Old English poetry. My concern is not, however, just that the extension leads to misnomers: while inconvenient, these do not in themselves detract much from the work of Amodio, O'Keeffe, or others. I am concerned, however, with some of the possible causes, and wider consequences, of the rise of orality as a category in medievalists' work—that orality has in some ways become a perpetuation of older ideas of primitivity, and a means to impose an otherness on the (early) Middle Ages in contradistinction to our own time which is disproportionate to the likely differences. Accordingly, recent work on medieval literacy has resisted modernist ideologies in which history is seen as progress, with the

19 See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)*, esp. 3–5; "Five Saga Books for a New Century"; cf. Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*; Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*.

20 On Norse, see Jónas Kristjánsson, *Um föstbræðrasögu*, esp. 59–80; Alaric Hall, "Changing Style and Changing Meaning: Icelandic Historiography and the Medieval Redactions of *Heiðreks saga*", esp. 21–22; on Apollonius, see Francis Cairns, "Orality, Writing and Reoralisation: Some Departures and Arrivals in Homer and Apollonius Rhodius"; cf. Marco Fantuzzi, "'Homeric' Formularity in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes".

circulation of printed literature as a central and even necessary feature in that progress, emphasising instead that literacy's effects on how people think about the world are domain-specific: literacy does not in itself lead to changes in how people think except insofar as they get better at performing those literate tasks which they undertake. Access to external representations can facilitate a leap in people's powers of reasoning, but the leap is not (or at least not usually) a revolution in how they think generally—only in how they think while interacting with external representations.²¹ The more profound potentials of literacy depend on how it is embedded in society. This is clear from the fact that literacy was already to be found throughout most of the barbarian West by the fifth century—in Anglo-Saxon culture in the form of runes—but cannot be seen to have had any transformative effects until much later; but it has also been shown by cultural-psychological research on communities today.²² On the one hand, then, the transformative character of literacy has been overplayed; on the other, our own orality has been underplayed. This reading of our evidence is still sinking in in medieval studies. John Miles Foley wrote that 'oral tradition lies somewhere in the past of all literary traditions', but neglected to add that it also, surely, lies somewhere in the present.²³ More recently, in the course of a sensitive and thorough survey and critique of previous work on medieval literacy, Adamska was still able to say that an "important change in the attitude of medieval scholars is that they are finally able to appreciate the efficiency of oral communication, and that—in some spheres of social life—oral modes existed until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond".²⁴ The earlier state of scholarship to which Adamska refers is thankfully far behind us, but her timidity in claiming occasional continuity of oral modes of communication beyond the Middle Ages betrays a situation in which medievalists have forgotten the fundamental roles of oral communication in (and around) parliaments, law courts and business meetings—to name just a few contexts. But this point was probably made most elegantly by Wickham:

21 E.g. Anna Adamska, "The Study of Medieval Literacy: Old Sources, New Ideas", 19, 28; cf. Ruth Finnegan, "'Oral Tradition': Weasel Words or Transdisciplinary Door to Multiplexity?"

22 Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline*, 227–235; David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*, 308–328. On Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, see generally R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*,

23 *Immanent Art*, 6.

24 "The Study", 29.

we as academics are the most text-based culture there has ever been, and arguably the most literate. But we live inside an entirely oral working world. Our sense of what the rules of the university are is, except in extreme moments, totally oral. And our *memory* of the university and its history is, without any significant exception, oral. Gossip about who said what at faculty meetings, and how well, may vary, according to whom you are speaking and, of course, with time: its truth is often a truth of meaningfulness, not of 100 per cent re-creation. But it is a lot truer than faculty minutes, at least to the version of the past that really matters to people. There is, in this respect, no significant difference between the Faculty of Arts in the University of Birmingham and the peasants of Montaillou.²⁵

People remain fundamentally oral communicants. Why, then, have medievalists acquired the habit of talking about medieval discourses as though we do not?

Orality and Modernity

To recap, my brief assessment of the state of the art in the use of orality as a heuristic tool in the study of Old English points to two broader issues in the place of orality in medieval studies:

1. Despite a significant amount of revisionist work, the concept of orality remains something of a vortex into which a range of only partly related issues have been sucked: authorial originality/communal property; impromptu composition/meditated composition; authorial and audience alienation/immediacy. The relevance of orality to these issues is not in dispute; the problem is that they do not vary along specifically oral/literate axes.
2. There is a modernist discourse whereby modern, literate society is (implicitly) contrasted with medieval, oral society. It would be absurd to suggest that a distinction between medieval life and life now has no validity; but there is reason to think that more is being made of the contrast than a detached consideration of the roles of orality in our own society would warrant.

That these two themes are intimately related is neatly shown by Goody and Watt's seminal 1963 study of orality and literacy:

we can no longer accept the view that anthropologists have as their

25 Chris Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry", 16–18 (quoting 17); cf. Amodio, "Introduction", 4–5; Ilkka Pysiäinen, "Singers of Tales", 158–159.

objective the study of primitive man, who is characterised by a “primitive mind”, while sociologists, on the other hand, concern themselves with “civilised man”, whose activities are guided by “rational thought” and tested by “logico-empirical procedures”. The reaction against such ethnocentric views, however, has now gone to the point of denying that the distinction between non-literate and literate society has any significant validity. This position seems contrary to personal observation [sic]; and so it has seemed worthwhile to enquire if there may not be, even from the most empirical and relativist standpoint, genuine illumination to be derived from a further consideration of some of the historical and analytic problems connected with the traditional dichotomy between non-literate and literate societies.²⁶

This article, and Goody’s subsequent work on orality and literacy (or, to prefer his own, subtler categorisation, communication) has been enormously influential, and full of useful and important insights. But the quotation makes explicit what I suggest has been implicit in much medieval scholarship: older discourses contrasting the faulty rationality of primitives with the logical and empirical rationality of moderns had to be abandoned, but proved susceptible to recasting as an essentially technological (and therefore ostensibly objective) distinction between more oral societies and more literate ones. The recasting was by no means merely a rhetorical exercise—it did change old ideas. But concepts of orality and literacy did not emerge without partly adapting to older structures of thought: the shift from thinking on an axis of primitivity/modernity to thinking in terms of orality/literacy encouraged the extension of the latter axis far beyond its literal referents of spoken and written communication: under the influence of older modes of thinking, it became a characterisation of structures of governance, justice, belief, remembering, thinking and more.

The merits of the different applications of the orality/literacy axis vary and cannot all be considered here. Nor is it possible to explore the important subset of discourses operating on the axis of primitivity/modernity which elevate the primitive as being of greater worth than the modern.²⁷ Here I simply illustrate my reading by examining some of the connections and conceptual overlaps between pro-modern thinking, Anglo-Saxon scholarship, and the orality/literacy axis, with reference to the domain which we conventionally refer to as “rationality”. We medievalists are continually challenged by the alternative assumptions

²⁶ Goody & Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy”, 304–345 at 305.

²⁷ For some incisive comments on this theme, see Patrick Sims-Williams, “The Uses of Writing in Early Medieval Wales”, 15–18.

underlying our sources' presentations of and responses to reality. We frequently navigate round miracles in saints' lives to access what we perceive as their plausible content, but even when that plausible content has been identified it often seems to include behaviour whose motivation is not obvious, or inferences which seem illogical.²⁸ Understanding the cultural construction of illness and healing, in relation not only to saints' lives but also to sources such as prayers, charms and medical recipes, has been a particular challenge, with earlier twentieth-century commentators denigrating the societies which produced these texts and later ones responding by trying to show the texts' underlying consistency with the framework of modern clinical medicine—in neither case convincingly.²⁹ Seventy years after its publication, Tolkien's rich evocation of critics' bewilderment at the focus of Anglo-Saxon England's greatest surviving work of literature on two monsters and a dragon remains a powerful metonym for the challenges presented by medieval studies as a whole.³⁰ Our scholarship amounts to a continual negotiation of these problems, but one which is frequently only implicit in our work, and, when tackled, liable to be tackled at least partly through the discourse of orality/literacy rather than directly on its own terms.

For an explicit, reasonably recent attempt to handle the problem of dealing with non-modern rationality, I turn to Jürgen Habermas, a self-conscious proponent of modernity who was trying to define modern rationality without resorting to orality and literacy (except insofar as literacy is central to his earlier work on the modern public sphere) around the time that medievalists were starting to apply anthropological approaches to literacy in their own field. In his *The Theory of Communicative Action*, originally published in 1981, Habermas tried to define what is distinctive about modern Western rationality by comparing it with the “mythical thinking” of “archaic” or “primitive” societies.³¹ His idea of modernity is set firmly in a teleological progression from mythical to religious-metaphysical to modern modes of thought, in which pre-Christian north-west European societies and, insofar as they maintained earlier modes of thinking, their early Christian descendants, should presumably serve as paradigmatic examples of mythical thinkers.³²

28 For an incisive study on these lines, with careful handling of the orality/literacy axis, see Jeremy Downes, “Or(e)ality: The Nature of Truth in Oral Settings”.

29 Hall, *Elves*, 6–9.

30 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”.

31 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, esp. i 43–74.

32 Habermas offered no criteria for defining “mythical thinkers” other than that they think mythically, which makes it hard to test his ideas empirically: if we identify a society to which Habermas's model does not apply, then by definition it cannot serve as a counter-example. His only empirical example was the Azande, on which basis his work has indeed been challenged by Emmanuel C. Eze, “Out of Africa: Communication Theory and Cultural Hegemony”.

Drawing on the structuralist thinking of Claude Lévi-Strauss and philosophical debate centred on Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft among the Azande*, Habermas contrasted modern rational thought, which is predicated on making distinctions between different domains of observable reality (prominently objects, societal norms and the self), with "mythical thinking". In Habermas's view, mythical thinking is predicated on linking all things to all other things, by processes of analogy which take the concrete, perceptible world as the basis for structuring understandings of what is not concrete. In particular, processes in the natural world are constructed on the analogy of human culture: the onset of illness, for example, is deemed to be caused by active agents with human-like motivations, such as gods or witches. Having posited a worldview in which all things were analogically related to all other things, Habermas then characterised this worldview as "closed": its self-referential web of reasoning comprises a sphere, which is not open to rational challenge or reinterpretation.

To take an example of Habermas's approach which relates particularly to Old English poetry, and so to ideas of orality,

the confusion of nature and culture by no means signifies only a conceptual blending of the objective and social worlds, but also a—by our lights—deficient differentiation between *language and world*; that is, between speech as the medium of communication and that about which understanding can be reached in linguistic communication. In the totalizing mode of thought of mythical worldviews, it is apparently difficult to draw with sufficient precision the familiar (to us) semiotic distinctions between the sign-substratum of linguistic expression, its semantic content, and the referent to which a speaker can refer with its help. The magical relation between names and designated objects, the concretistic relation between the meaning of expressions and the states-of-affairs represented give evidence of systematic confusion between *internal connections of meaning* and *external connections of objects*. Internal relations obtain between symbolic expressions, external relations between entities that appear in the world.³³

Seeing such rhetoric bare of any guise of orality and literacy, most medievalists would find this statement problematic at best. As Eze has

33 *The Theory*, i 49.

pointed out from a contemporary African perspective—Habermas’s archetype for mythical thinkers being African—such readings are offensive at a political level, and problematic at an evidential one; and Habermas himself drifted from the strong views quoted here to a more plausible weak position which posits a cline between more and less modern societies, though without clarifying how this shift related to his understanding of the evidence.³⁴ Even so, I suggest that it is common for us to deploy the phrase *the power of words*, with much the same implications as Habermas’s ‘deficient differentiation between *language and world*’.³⁵ While individual studies under the banner of ‘the power of words’ have often been valuable, the term implies that words were once held to have some mystical power which today they do not. However, I consider it fairly clear that Habermas, and at least some of those who have similar ideas, have mistaken the exceptions which prove the rule for the rule itself. Some medieval texts indeed blur distinctions between language and the world, between a word, its meaning, and the thing it denotes. The most impressive example from the Old English poetic corpus is the charm *Wið færstice*, which constructs and responds to illness as a projectile, apparently partly through the polysemy of the word *gescot* (which seems to have meant not only “projectile” but, in medical discourse, “sharp pain”).³⁶ But such magical texts work by adopting special registers marked off from normal language by strategies such as metre (as in Old English poetic charms), language (as with prayers in Latin or verbal charms which are not actually in an identifiable language), reference to mythical content (Christian or otherwise), and, one might reasonably presume, performative context. In this way they show that language and the world were *not* blurred, except in special and specific discourses which derived their meaning precisely by blending what was known to be separate. It was not “difficult to draw with sufficient precision the familiar (to us) semiotic distinctions between the sign-substratum of linguistic expression, its semantic content, and the referent”: rather, it was this difficulty which made magical discourses powerful. Nor is it clear that such blurrings, objectively studied, would prove uncharacteristic even of the discourses of twentieth-century clinical medicine: we are looking here at an incautiously perpetuated modernist distinction between medieval and modern cultures

34 Eze; Habermas, esp. i 70–71.

35 E.g. Jolly, 15–16. I should admit that part of the genesis of this paper lies in my own participation, *mea culpa*, at the 2005 International Medieval Congress at Leeds, in a session entitled ‘The Power of Words in Early Medieval Insular Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Survey’.

36 Hall, *Elves*, 108–115.

which does not bear scrutiny.³⁷

Likewise, by the light of recent work on early medieval non-Christian beliefs in England and Scandinavia, the totalising nature of mythical thinking in general looks like a product of syncretising, totalising, modern scholarship working to synthesise a diverse, variable and sometimes contradictory range of competing ideas into neatly bounded entities such as “Norse mythology” or “Anglo-Saxon paganism”.³⁸ It is tempting to try to interpret the historiographical shift away from syncretising interpretations of our sources in terms of orality and literacy: modern scholars, steeped in a literate Christian tradition, did not appreciate that pre-literate Germanic-speakers lacked a systematised theology, because they did not appreciate how differently literate cultures work from oral ones. As a way of contrasting our culture with early medieval ones, this would at one level be diametrically different from Habermas’s approach: whereas Habermas saw a “totalising” primitive rationality contrasted with an “open” modern rationality, medievalists are increasingly envisaging a fluid, competing range of oral traditions contrasted with a modern, systematising, literate scholarly culture. This analysis would not be without value.³⁹ At another level, however, it would simply be another way of packaging the distinctions between a familiar culture and an unfamiliar one such as to make it appear that the underlying processes of thought and cultural reproduction were fundamentally dissimilar. As I have suggested above, this is worth questioning.

Where Next?

I have argued, then, that although useful, the concepts of orality and literacy have been extended further beyond their literal referents of spoken and written communication than is heuristically useful. In the case of medieval vernacular poetry, this extension has encouraged the words’ association with variables such as the degree of improvisation and the construction of authorial originality. The current emphasis on literate methods and contexts for the writing of our surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry encourages the rethinking of some of these applications. More generally, I suggest, the orality/literacy axis has to some extent facilitated the perpetuation of an earlier contrast between primitivity and modernity

37 A classic on the theme being Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*.

38 Cf. Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* and particularly his criticisms at 40–42. Major syncretic studies include Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*; E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*.

39 Cf. the similar approaches in Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Holy Book: The Invention of Writing and Religious Cognition”.

which deserves still to be questioned and disputed. The way we write and think now is less radically different from people in highly oral medieval societies than the prevailing discourse in medieval studies would suggest. Pruning back our conceptions of the oral and the literate to their stricter denotations, we might hope to see more clearly what would benefit from alternative interpretations.

The example on which I have focused here is rationality and reasoning. While it is hard to quantify how frequently people choose to blur the distinctions between language and reality, and so to claim that doing so is more characteristic of medieval people or of ourselves, it seems clear to me that scholars have underestimated the prevalence of this activity in modern culture, and greatly over-emphasised its pervasiveness in medieval culture. This mode of thinking reflects older primitivity/modernity distinctions, but has been perpetuated, to a considerable degree, in the guise of orality/literacy. Rethinking our rhetoric here can help us to reassess the phenomena involved. Meanwhile, one indicator of one of the directions we might look to for alternative axes on which to situate the differences between our cultures and those of the medieval past, is afforded by recent debate in the cognitive science of religion on magic, religion, and rationality. Working in a paradigm which seeks universals of human cognitive architecture rather than to identify differences over time, some scholars in this field have found it useful to draw on ideas of “dual-process” thinking, whereby “online” reasoning (on-the-spot, intuitive reasoning) involves different cognitive processes from “reflective” thinking.⁴⁰ Reflective thinking can be enormously assisted by literacy, which provides a memory store external to the brain offering not only raw capacity for data but, more importantly, different modes of data-storage and retrieval. The distinction between online and reflective thinking provides a mechanism more fundamental than literacy for explaining differences in human behaviour. It is an axis which helps us to understand how people in a highly literate community nonetheless frequently find themselves thinking online and showing the associated kinds of inferences, and how people in a highly oral community may nonetheless think reflectively. This is not in itself, of course, a solution to the problem of how we relate ourselves to the medieval past; in theory the dichotomy of medieval/modern might be transformed into that of online/reflective thought no less than into orality/literacy. But the example does show how questioning the prominent role of orality/literacy in the discourse of our field

40 See, for example, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Singers”.

could lead to quite different kinds of explanation for the world which our sources portray, and how alternative axes of analysis might foreground quite different kinds of assumptions—in this case, humans’ putative biological stability, in contradistinction to their more prominently discussed cultural instabilities.

To suggest one more avenue, one might look to changes within the historical discipline. The last thirty years in medieval studies saw an explosive, anthropologically-inspired transition from considering writing simply as the medium of transmission of historical information to being the subject of historical study in its own right, followed by the expansion of work on non-written communication under the banners of ritual and memory. These sweeping changes in what professed historians consider their proper purview are now starting to reach language itself.⁴¹ They suggest discourse as one important means of responding to the problematic accretions around the objective division between spoken and written communication, echoing Goody’s choice of *communications* as the banner for his studies on orality and literacy. The study of medieval discourses cannot of course be viable without a sensitivity to the means of communication and an awareness of the kinds of contexts (spoken but also written) which are no longer available, and thinking on orality and literacy has an important place in this, but they also suggest ways in which we can experiment with new approaches without needing to carry the orality/literacy paradigm with us.

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41 Trail-blazing works include a number by Peter Burke, prominently the collection edited by him and Roy Porter, *The Social History of Language*; for recent examples relating to the field of this article, see Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500–1000*, 13–50; Hans Hummer, *Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe*, 130–154; Hall, *Elves*, esp. 9–20, 167–173.

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