

INTRODUCTION TO THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

MIRANDA VILLESVIK

THE COLLECTION OPENS with essays by Gregory Nagy and Susan Niditch focusing, respectively, on the ancient Greek and biblical traditions. Nagy, in “Orality and Literacy Revisited,” turns to examples drawn from the ancient Greek, classical Persian, and medieval Irish traditions to demonstrate the compatibility of orality and literacy. After citing instances within these oral traditions that refer directly or indirectly to the presence of texts, he points to the still unresolved question of how observations derived from living oral traditions can best be applied to oral-traditional texts. In “Preserving Traditions of ‘Them’ and the Creation of ‘Us’: Formulaic Language, Historiography, Mythology, and Self-Definition,” Niditch examines the interwoven relationship between the two fields of oral literature and biblical studies and interrogates the ways in which misconceptions have shaped biblicists’ approaches to oral literature. Considering the bible as a “transitional work” straddling the line between oral and written texts, Niditch asks how do these formulas, as remnants of the oral tradition of the bible, interact with its written and translated versions? Shedding light on the use of formulas in the bible, Niditch demonstrates how the perception of the Israelites and Ishmaelites has led to misconceptions of the bible in translation and rewrites our understanding of the formulas as employed by Israelite authors with a vested interest in furthering Israelite history.

The collection then turns, in essays by Andy Orchard, Mark C. Amodio, and Nancy Mason Bradbury and in a conversation with and performances by Benjamin Bagby, to medieval England. Orchard, in “Beyond Books: The Confluence of Influence and the Old English *Judith*,” examines the intertextuality of *Judith*, concentrating on the poet’s idiosyncratic handling of his biblical source material and on his unusual vocabulary and creative use of Anglo-Saxon metrics. Looking both back to the oral tradition out of which *Judith* emerged and forward to the ways in which later poets remember and repurpose elements of the poem, Orchard argues that the poem witnesses the lively interaction of a living (textual) and inherited (oral) tradition. In “Embodying the Oral Tradition: Performance and Performative Poetics in and of *Beowulf*,” Amodio draws a contrast between the *mediated* artistic productions of text, film, and/or sound recording and the *embodied* artistic productions of cultures without access to the technology of writing. After identifying and exploring the dynamics of several “embedded” performances within *Beowulf*, he turns to consider contemporary performances of the poem and argues that they, too, have much to reveal about the poem’s traditional expressive economy. In “Performing Anglo-Saxon Elegies: A Conversation,” Amodio and Bagby discuss the strategies Bagby has developed (and is continuing to develop) when performing Anglo-Saxon elegies. The topics they touch on include: Bagby’s use of a special six-stringed harp which was often used by Anglo-Saxon performers for both heroic and monastic texts and which he employs to accentuate the mood of a scene’s performance; musicology; the performative poetics of Anglo-Saxon texts; and the degree to which modern-day performances of

texts rooted in oral tradition can reveal elements, but not the whole, of the original performative process. The performances Amodio and Bagby discuss are freely available to all readers of this volume.¹ Bagby's "Notes on the Recordings of Three Anglo-Saxon Elegies" provides context for the performances he recorded for this volume, and includes information on the specialized harps that he uses. In the final essay focusing exclusively on the medieval English oral tradition, Bradbury, in "Healing Charms in the Lincoln Thornton Manuscript," acknowledges that while the performance settings for the medieval charms she explores are largely unrecoverable, the charms and their manuscript contexts nonetheless provide valuable keys to their performance. Bradbury focuses on Robert Thornton's fifteenth-century English household book in an attempt to uncover what it can teach us about its compiler's involvement with charming and about the performance and perceived efficacy of the many charms recorded within its pages.

In the two essays that follow, Edward R. Haymes and Yuri Kleiner turn their attention to the formula, an essential and still not fully understood—or easily or universally—defined feature of oral traditions. Haymes's "Is the 'Formula' the Key to Oral Composition?" questions the foundational position the school of oral-formulaic composition ascribed to the formula. He challenges the notion that formulaic density reliably indexes a text's orality by offering a metrical analysis of the *Nibelungenlied* that reveals that it is not very formulaic and by arguing that German medieval epics are largely "imitation oral" and that their authors consciously used the oral style because it had some significance to the poet. In "The Formula: Morphology and Syntax," Kleiner traces the divergent sources informing our modern idea of the "formula" and examines how interpretations of the formula challenge our understanding of texts and their incorporations of the formula. Along with charting the history of the word "formula" and touching on the ways in which varying definitions across disciplines inform our understanding of what a formula is and how it works, Kleiner also argues that substitutions are not mechanical, but have aesthetics and hierarchies and can uncover the role of the poet in creating the lines.

The three following essays, Stephen Mitchell's, "Old Norse Riddles and Other Verbal Contests in Performance," Terry Gunnell's, "Performance Archaeology, *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál*, and the Study of Old Nordic Religions," and Thomas A. DuBois's, "'To Surf through the Shared Riches of the Story Hoard': The oAgora of the Sigurðr Story," focus on various aspects of the oral traditions of the Northern Germanic world. By re-contextualizing the Old Norse riddles within their performative contexts, Mitchell argues that the Norse riddling contests are not the clean, dignified events that we perceive them to be in the texts. Rather, they are loud, aggressive, and overtly confrontational moments, similar in many ways to the contemporary verbal competitions Mitchell turns to as comparands. In an essay informed by performance studies, Gunnell, too, calls attention to the performative contexts of medieval texts, particularly those of *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. Resituating these texts in their original performative contexts, he argues, brings into sharp focus the ways in which the texts bring the past to life and signal to the audience that a new phase of life is beginning, one in which the hall is transformed

¹ These performances can be change to; found in the folder Bagby at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U.

into a religious space in which men momentarily become gods or heroes. DuBois traces the appearances of the Sigurðr story in Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts and argues that the separate references to the story can best be seen as pathways connecting its different versions and performances. Following the approach Foley takes in *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, DuBois catalogues the numerous appearances of the Sigurðr story in texts such as *Beowulf*, *Grípisspá*, and *Sturlunga Saga* under headings to which the reader can refer back in a manner similar to clicking on a weblink. Presenting these materials in this way, DuBois argues, aligns them with the way in which a contemporary audience, who would have seen the Sigurðr story as points of reference threaded through other familiar stories and not as a unified, linear narrative, would have received it.

In “When a Hero Lies,” Joseph Falaky Nagy discusses heroic lies within a narrative and how they relate to instances of multiformity in the texts of *Táin Bó Fróech*. Nagy argues that the author was aware of the multiformity witnessed in different versions of the text and made use of it, as seen most clearly when Fróech tells lies or when narrative contradictions arise. Unlike other scholars who attribute narrative variations among versions to scribal error, Nagy sees these moments as witnessing the storyteller’s unwillingness to choose between versions of the narrative, even at the cost of confusing the reader. In “‘The True Nature of the *aoidos*’: The Kirghiz Singer of Tales and the Epic of *Manas*,” Karl Reichl examines the formulaic qualities of *Manas* as a means of explicating the similarities between the art of the ancient Greek *aoidos* and the Kirghiz oral poet. In looking at the distribution and diction of formulas, he demonstrates that while Kirghiz epics have many traits common to oral epics they also have traits, like rhyme-strings, that set them apart from other oral epics.

The collection closes with Ruth Finnegan’s graceful, insightful, and touching, “John Miles Foley: Open Mind, Open Access, Open Tradition, Open Foley,” in which she chronicles her decades-long friendship with Foley, candidly documenting everything from their early scholarly disagreements to their mutual and lasting influence on one another’s work. Unlike Foley, who early in his career was a vocal (and from her perspective at times strident) advocate of the Parry–Lord approach, Finnegan remained sceptical of it because, as her own fieldwork in Africa revealed, there were many oral traditions for which the theory of oral-formulaic composition simply could not account. She aptly highlights, in a way that few others could, the generosity of spirit with which Foley was infused as well as the extraordinary range and capaciousness of his mind. Her elegant final words will resonate with all who knew Foley.

Author Biography Miranda Villesvik currently works as an archivist at WGBH in Boston, where she is also studying for her master's degree in Library and Information Science at Simmons University. She added her contributions during her time as a student at Vassar College, where she was a double major in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Greek and Roman Studies. Under the auspices of Vassar's Ford Scholars program, she spent a summer helping to copy-edit drafts of articles in the volume and writing the introduction to the individual contributions therein. Her senior thesis, supervised by Mark Amodio, explores the relationships between the riddles of Symphosius's *Aenigmata* and those found in the Exeter Book.