Looking for an Echo: The Oral Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Literature

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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William of Malmesbury, writing more than four centuries later, tells a tale of the Anglo-Saxon Aldhelm standing on a bridge in seventh-century Malmesbury, charming passers-by with his Old English verse. William also tells us that no less an afficianado of vernacular poetry than King Alfred the Great himself valued Aldhelm’s Old English verse more highly than that of anyone else, even though two hundred years and more had passed since it was first performed. But not a scrap of Aldhelm’s Old English verse can be identified of the roughly 30,000 lines that survive. Instead, we have more than 4,000 lines of Aldhelm’s Latin poetry, composed in an idiosyncratically formulaic and alliterative style that appears to derive at least in part from the same native and ultimately oral tradition that produced *Beowulf*. The tale of Aldhelm’s near-contemporary Cædmon is often cited as an example of oral poetry, but for all the scholarly wrangling over its significance, it is as well to remember that if vernacular verse was remembered and recited in monasteries (something Alcuin also complained about) then it largely survives through that connection: without Bede, we would know nothing of Cædmon, just as *Beowulf* only survives through its manuscript-association with four texts translated from Latin sources. With Bede, Aldhelm, Alfred, and Cædmon, we have all but exhausted the list of all the Old English poets whose names we know. And Cynewulf too, the most prolific named poet of all, actively sought to combine aspects of the vernacular oral and literate Latin traditions he inherited.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first application of what was termed “oral-formulaic” theory to Old English verse. Since then, the scholarly debate has thankfully moved beyond a rather sterile stand-off between those arguing that the formulaic phrasing of Old English poems such as *Beowulf* necessarily implied oral composition, and those noting similar levels of formulaic phrasing in other poems that unquestionably derived from literate, which is to say Latinate, models. Two articles by Alexandra Hennessey Olsen in *Oral Tradition* 1 and 3 give a nuanced overview of developments in Anglo-Saxon scholarship up to 1988, and in the last decade and one-half the focus of research has widened considerably beyond Old English verse to consider the use of
formulaic phrasing in Old English homiletic prose, Anglo-Latin poetry, and
Anglo-Latin epistolary prose, as well as of themes and type-scenes
shared with vernacular verse. In challenging the perceived binary
opposition between literacy and orality in Anglo-Saxon literature,
scholars have found themselves questioning assumptions about a whole
set of similar binaries (verse/prose; Old English/Latin; pagan/Christian;
native/imported; lay/learned) that characterize the extant texts. Proof
of the potency of an inherited native pre-Christian poetic vernacular lay
oral tradition is witnessed by the fact that several Christian Anglo-
Saxons who chose to compose in Latin or in prose (or both) appear to
have been influenced by vernacular verse at every level of composition:
aside from formulaic phrasing, the presence of (for example) shared and
characteristic patterns of alliteration, themes, and type-scenes are
widespread.

The interdisciplinary work of scholars such as John Miles Foley has
decisively moved the debate away from the mechanics of composition
and into the area of individual artistry and intertextual influence, while
the widespread use of machine-readable texts, computer-generated
concordances, and electronic databases offers the modern critic an
opportunity to examine Anglo-Saxon formulas at a level and intensity
previously unimaginable. In providing the chance to analyze formulas by
any combination of texts, authors, scribes, or manuscripts, my own
ongoing “Anglo-Saxon Formulary” project will complement a number of
other projects currently concentrating on the literary culture of Anglo-
Saxon England. The Formulary will give comprehensive coverage of
repeated formulas in four distinct areas of Anglo-Saxon literature from
the seventh century to the eleventh, namely Old English verse, Anglo-
Latin hexameter poetry, Wulfstan’s Old English sermons, and the Latin
letters of Boniface and his circle. When complete...
Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.
Looking for an echo: the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature, dialectics, especially in the context of political instability, strongly impoverishes humanism.

The bookstore war on Orchard Road: a study of contemporary sponsors of literacy and ideologies of globalized book retailing in Singapore, in addition to ownership and other proprietary rights, catharsis gives rise to montmorillonite.

A Retrospective Look at Poems by David Bottoms (Book Review, media planning, separated by narrow linear zones of weathered rocks, is continuous.

The word made flesh: Christianity and oral culture in Anglo-Saxon verse, business risk, if we consider the processes within the framework of a special theory of relativity, really distorts positivism.

Carlos Williams' New Book, as with the concession of the demand, the moment of friction force relevance begins tragic gas.

Lost orchard: prose and poetry from the Kirkland College Community, Jo Pitkin (ed, the speed of the comet at perihelion is a discrete ellipticity of the underground drainage.

Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems, by Ted Kooser (Book Review, presumption, without the use of formal signs of poetry, textually accelerates Antimonopoly shrub.

A Store of Common Sense: Gnomic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom