

Textual to Oral: the Impact of Transmission on Narrative Word-Art

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This paper will undertake an approach to 'the oral history of the Middle Ages' which is indirect in at least three ways. In the first instance it studies recent oral tradition rather than medieval texts directly, in this reflecting the general thrust of the writer's research, which has characteristically sought to supplement direct approaches to medieval and Renaissance literature and culture by the indirect (and philologically less challenging) one of exploring whether folk traditions of the last two centuries or so, be they songs, legends or customs, may preserve something of, or otherwise cast light on, their late-medieval and early-modern antecedents. This is done in the spirit of Peter Burke's 'regressive method',¹ moving cautiously from better-documented recent tradition to worse-documented early tradition, rather than that of much earlier (and some recent) research, which, on the assumption that folklore preserves a primitive, prehistoric culture, can assume a massive continuity in tradition.² Secondly, while one imagines that for most historians, the orality that most concerns them pertains to the phase that comes before textualization, that is the eye-witness reports, the rumours, the legends, etc. that intervene between an event and the making of the surviving written record of the event (and which significantly affect the validity and accuracy of that record),³ this study is of an orality that follows textualization, when a written (here more strictly a printed) text is memorized and later retrieved from memory in performance, memorized by others from such performance and reproduced by them in performance in turn, and so on, in what mutates and bifurcates into the verbal instability and polytextuality endemic to folk tradition. And lastly, rather than dealing with conventional historical (i.e. functionally utilitarian) texts like legal, financial or administrative documents, this study will

¹ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978; repr. London: Temple Smith, 1979), pp. 81-87.

² For some vigorous animadversions against the survivalist approach see Georgina Boyes, "Cultural Survivals Theory and Traditional Customs. An Examination of the Effects of Privileging on the Form and Perception of Some English Calendar Customs", *Folk Life*, 26 (1987-8), pp. 5-11; for an instance of its resurgence see Linda Woodbridge, "Black and White and Red All Over: The Sonnet Mistress Amongst the Ndembu", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40 (1987), pp. 247-297.

³ As discussed in Joseph J. Vansina's classic *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology* [orig. Brussels, 1961], trans. H.M. Wright (London, 1965; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

examine song texts, that is to say consciously constructed verbal artefacts, examples of what my title designates as 'word-art', by way of proffering a term suitable for covering both the written (and printed) works for which 'literature' is strictly appropriate, and the oral traditions for which 'oral literature' is somewhat awkward.⁴

It can be hoped, however, that despite or even because of these indirections the approach illustrated in what follows can be of more general historical interest and significance, in addition to its intrinsic merits (such as they are) in the study of traditional narrative song. The advantage of studying recent traditions is of course that they are better documented than their genuinely medieval antecedents. The compensatory disadvantage is change over time, so that (in Peter Burke's words) the regressive method 'does not consist of taking descriptions of relatively recent situations and cheerfully assuming that they apply equally well to earlier periods'.⁵ In the present instance, however, change over time – alterations in a narrative over decades or centuries – is precisely the phenomenon to be investigated, rather than an obstacle complicating the investigation: The changes are interesting and significant in their own right, rather than a regrettable distortion of the original text. The investigation to follow earns its ticket to a symposium and a publication on oral history by offering a methodology that provides unusually reliable insights into the nature of oral tradition and precisely what it does to a verbal artefact subjected to its preserving and re-shaping processes.

The difference between post-textual and pre-textual tradition, meanwhile, need not be exaggerated. Once it loses touch with the original, post-textual transmission is as oral and aural as pre-textual. And by involving both visual word-art (texts) and aural (performances) at the same time, this present investigation is in some ways closer to medieval traditions, which characteristically involve a close and complex interaction between written and oral transmission, than either investigations of more strictly (if never completely) illiterate traditions, among (for want of a better term) less 'developed' cultures, or investigations of the processes of memory and recall within our modern, overwhelmingly literate, culture.⁶

Finally, the difference between a consciously crafted (e.g. ballad) narrative of an event and, say, an eye-witness report of the same occurrence, is a matter of degree rather than kind. There has been a 'literary turn' in historical studies which acknowledges that even the most apparently factual reports are shaped by formal constraints, or tend towards conformity with an existing paradigmatic (or almost

⁴ This term also offers the opportunity of distinguishing between visual word-art (i.e. literature) which is read by the eye, and aural word-art which is heard by the ear.

⁵ Burke, *Popular Culture*, p. 83.

⁶ For an excellent instance of the former category, see the work of Karl Reichl, for instance his *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure* (New York: Garland, 1992); and of the latter Wanda T. Wallace and David C. Rubin, "'The Wreck of the Old 97': A real event remembered in song," in *Remembering reconsidered: Ecological and traditional approaches to the study of memory*, eds. Ulric Neisser and Eugene Winograd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 283-310.

'generic') model for their kind.⁷ And as it happens most of the ballads studied in the project behind this paper (like the specific instance it analyses) are 'historical' in the sense of claiming to report events that really did happen, and which can sometimes be documented in more conventional historical records (or rather which have been recorded in the narrative mode typical of historical narratives other than the ballad) such as court reports and newspapers.⁸

The latter part of this introductory apologia is occasioned by the simple circumstance that this paper derives from a project which is designed to contribute to the study of English literary history rather than history in the more conventional sense (and not to be confused with a *historicist* fashion of literary interpretation). Early English aural word-art has by definition virtually disappeared, leaving only a few, visual, traces, but oral transmission is a significant or even decisive factor for two fields within the conventional literary canon: Elizabethan drama (including the plays of Shakespeare) and the traditional (or 'popular') ballad. While it is hard to imagine an author more central to the literary canon than Shakespeare, it is increasingly appreciated that the theatrical dimension of his plays is not merely an aspect of their background to which occasional lip-service may be paid, but a decisive force in the shaping and reshaping of the very texts on which critical endeavour is based. That theatrical context includes a significant oral element in the memorizing of the text by the players and its repeated reconstruction from memory in performance, plus the possibility of some kind of recording from oral tradition in the 'memorial reconstruction' of 'reported' Shakespearean texts (the notorious 'bad' quartos).⁹ Elizabethan drama will correspondingly be accorded a passing glance below: the bulk of this paper will, however, be devoted to the ballad.

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'Ballad', not least in Medieval Studies, is an awkward term with numerous meanings, best distinguished by some kind of modification. Thus the Middle English lyric genre of French origins, the *ballade*, even though it may be a distant ancestor of 'the ballad' in one or more of its other senses,¹⁰ is best distinguished by italics and French spelling. At the other extreme 'ballad' in the modern sense of a pop-song with slow tune and sentimental content is best forgotten altogether,

⁷ The most striking instance of this approach for the present writer has been Natalie Zemon Davis's *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

⁸ For a fascinating exploration of how both songs and newspapers shape events into conformity with pre-existing narrative paradigms see Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl! The Murdered-Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).

⁹ Now subjected to an intense analysis in Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespearean Suspect Texts. The 'Bad' Quartos and Their Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Albert Friedman, *The Ballad Revival. Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), ch. II, and "The Late Medieval Ballade and the Origin of Broadside Balladry," *Medium Ævum*, 27 (1958), pp. 96-110.

whatever the ultimate connections. This effectively restricts the meaning of 'ballad' in literary history (in English) to a popular narrative song: 'popular' in the sense of being known and appreciated by many people who do not need special qualifications (e.g. wealth or education) to do so; 'song' in the sense of being performed to a tune, whose repetitions, combined with the words they accompany, divide the song into stanzas, and whose melodic structures (reinforced by verbal rhymes) divide those stanzas into two or (more often) four lines.¹¹

But among songs termed ballads it is conventional, and entirely proper, at least in the first instance, to distinguish two major traditions: the 'broadside ballad' (which is what most early-modern references to 'ballads' designate), and what will here be called the 'traditional ballad'. The latter, in the definitive English scholarly edition, is designated the 'popular ballad',¹² but in the century or more which has passed since its publication 'popular' has come to be associated more emphatically with the mass culture of the modern media, of which the 'broadside ballad' was indeed itself a significant forerunner. As the name implies, broadside ballads were printed and distributed on single sheets of paper,¹³ and they were written (to fit existing popular tunes) by hack-writers in the employ of the publishers, produced in large numbers and sold at stalls or by itinerant ballad-peddlers. In contrast the 'traditional ballad' is often associated with 'tradition' in the sense of oral transmission and performance, but the connection is not definitive: some texts of 'traditional ballads' have actually appeared on broadsides, while conversely some songs, even narrative songs, retrieved from oral tradition are not considered 'ballads'. And with regard to the Middle Ages of course there are ballads, preserved in manuscripts, which chronologically did not have the option of being broadside ballads, but whose relationship to oral tradition is not empirically documented.

The traditional ballad is best defined in the first instance not in terms of its transmission or format but by internal, verbal features, effectively by the way it tells its story within the constraints of the stanzaic form.¹⁴ There are only a few surviving medieval English texts which display this 'balladic' narrative mode, but they do so convincingly, and one of the best examples is 'St Stephen and Herod',

¹¹ B.H. Bronson, ed., *The Singing Tradition of Child's Popular Ballads* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. xxvii.

¹² Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1892-8; repr. in 5 vols. New York: Dover Books, 1965).

¹³ Technically the paper was a broadsheet, the name of the song-type indicating it was printed on one side only of this. There is a final terminological twist in the circumstance that not all songs published in this format were narrative, but it is not significant enough to be made an issue of in the present context. See Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature* (Tavistock: David and Charles, 1973), for a clear historical review.

¹⁴ Standard reviews of ballad form are provided in G.H. Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (Oxford, 1932; repr. New York: Gordian Press, 1974), and Flemming G. Andersen, et al., *The Ballad as Narrative. Studies in the Ballad Traditions of England, Scotland, Germany and Denmark* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1982).

from a mid-fifteenth-century MS (here in modernized spelling and orthography, and with typographical markings to be explained below):

1. Saint Stephen was a clerk
in King Herod's hall
 And served him of bread and cloth
 as every king befall.
2. Stephen out of kitchen came,
 with boar's head on hand;
 He saw a star was fair and bright
 over Bethlehem stand.
3. He cast adown the boar's head
 and went into the hall:
'I forsake thee, King Herod,
and thy works all.'
4. 'I forsake the, King Herod,
and thy works all;
There is a child in Bethlehem born
is better than we all.'
5. 'What ails thee, Stephen?
 What is thee befall?
Lacked thee either meat or drink
in King Herod's Hall?'
6. 'Lacked me neither meat nor drink
in King Herod's hall;
There is a child in Bethlehem born
is better than we all.'
7. 'What ails thee, Stephen?
 art thou wood [mad] or begin to breed [brood]
Lacked thee either gold or fee,
or any rich weed [clothes]?'
8. 'Lacked me neither gold nor fee
nor no rich weed;
There is a child in Bethlehem born
shall help us at our need.'
9. 'That is all so sooth, Stephen,
 all so sooth iwis [certainly]
 As this capon [cock] crow shall
 that lies here in my dish.'
10. That word was not so soon said,
 that word in that hall,
 The capon crew, 'Christus natus est!'
 among the lords all.
11. 'Rise up my tormentors,
 by two and all by one
 And lead Stephen out of this town,
and stone him with stone!'

12. Took they Stephen,
 and stoned him in the way
 And therefore is his eve
 on Christ's own day.¹⁵

This is quite on a par with the 'classic' ballads of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland which were paradigmatic in establishing the perceived characteristics of the genre¹⁶ (or even with the analogous ballads – *folkeviser* – of seventeenth-century Denmark) in displaying balladic characteristics such as narrative *economy* (e.g. the minimal setting of the scene and the absence of descriptions of persons and places), *impersonality* (little comment or explanation by the narrator – here confined to the last two lines) and *dramatic* qualities: seven and a half of the song's twelve stanzas comprise direct speech, most of them providing the dialogue for the intense one to one confrontation between St Stephen and King Herod. In this the song also displays the characteristic disjointed narrative progress (measured in events per stanza) of the ballad, '*leaping*' from the beginning into that dialogue (and later on to the stoning), '*lingering*' over the central scene (essentially stanzas 3 to 11, inclusive). This lingering, in turn, is caused by a striking concentration of the *repetitions* which characterize the ballad's verbal style (the words concerned underlined in the text above). And taken as a whole, this song displays a goodly range of the ballad genre's various types of verbal repetition: in terms of quantity there are balances (between two stanzas or lines) and triads (sequences of three similar units); in terms of quality there is simple repetition between adjacent stanzas (e.g. 3.3-4 : 4.1-2), the repetition in an answer of the formulation of the question to which it responds (e.g. 5.3-4 : 6.1-2; 7.3-4 : 8.1-2), and in the narrating of an action of the instruction to do it (11.4 : 12.2); two similar events (Herod's two questions and Stephen's two answers; 5-6 : 7-8) are rendered in near identical phrases, some of which also participate in Stephen's triad of exclamations that 'There is a child in Bethlehem born' (4.3 : 6.3 : 8.3).

What is harder to document is the *formulaic diction* which is equally characteristic of the balladic style, any given ballad sharing many phrases, lines, half or even whole stanzas with other ballads, not as a result of the direct influence this would normally be a symptom of in literary works, but because these formulas or 'commonplaces' are common to the tradition as a whole. Or rather to the local tradition as a whole, for there is likely to be some variation in the corpus of formulas between regional traditions and within traditions over time. There are not really enough early English ballads surviving (and they may survive from different regions) to make formula-hunting a viable exercise, but as sometimes happens the formulaic status of a particular formulation can be demonstrated by its recurrence within a single text in a way which is not caused by the structural repetitions just discussed. I would suggest this is the case with 'in King Herod's hall' (italicized

¹⁵ *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Child, #22 [modernized TP].

¹⁶ Thomas Pettitt, "Mrs Brown's 'Lass of Roch Royal' and the Golden Age of Scottish Balladry," *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 29 (1984), pp. 13-31.

in the text above): the repetition between 5.4 and 6.2 is structural (formulation of question repeated in formulation of answer), but that in 1.2 is not. (In other songs, of course, 'Herod' would be replaced by other names or pronouns.) Otherwise useful 'filler' phrases such as 'as every king befall' (1.4), 'all so sooth iwis' (9.2), 'among the lords all' (10.4), and 'by two and all by one' (11.2), along with phrases for common actions or situations like 'and went into the ...' (3.2), 'with ... on hand' (2.2), and 'That word was not so soon said' (10.1) are also likely to have formulaic status.

It would be fair to say that in the scholarship they have prompted over more than two centuries (effectively since the publication of Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1767) the ballad question has been, directly or indirectly, just how this balladic narrative mode came about. Amidst the disagreements there has been a general consensus that, firstly, it is not a matter of deliberate choice on the part of individual poets composing ballads and, secondly, that it has some connection with the ballads' traditional, oral, context.

Early on there was a somewhat romantic theory of 'communal composition' which saw ballads as deriving from an extremely primitive cultural context, produced collectively in the frenzy of a ceremonial or celebratory tribal dance. Most features of the balladic mode were the marks left by this process, but their occurrence and intensity in a given ballad declined over the centuries as it was subject to the interventions of individual singers.¹⁷ The communal origins theory was pretty thoroughly shaken by Louise Pound, who questioned both its basic premises and its empirical documentation,¹⁸ and indeed it is implicitly disproved in the project this paper reflects, which shows precisely that in the trajectory of a given song balladic features increase rather than decrease the longer it has been in tradition. More recently, following a smaller scale effort by James H. Jones,¹⁹ and deploying the insights of the 'oral formulaic' approach of Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord,²⁰ David Buchan prompted a fierce but fruitful controversy with his theory that most balladic features were symptomatic of the songs being recreated at each singing by an improvisational process rather than reproduced (at least in intention) verbatim from memory. In the process Buchan produced an extremely insightful analysis of the nature of these balladic characteristics, and a fascinating contextual history of the ballad tradition in North East Scotland, but his central thesis has by and large not been accepted,²¹ and again the textual

¹⁷ Francis B. Gummere, *The Popular Ballad* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907).

¹⁸ Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1921).

¹⁹ James H. Jones, "Commonplace and Memorization in the Oral Tradition of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads," *Journal of American Folklore*, 74 (1961), 97-112.

²⁰ The classic work is of course Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960; repr. New York: Atheneum, 1974).

²¹ David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: RKP, 1972). For the opposition see A.B. Friedman, "The Formulaic Improvisation Theory of Ballad Tradition – a Counterstatement," *Journal of American Folklore*, 74 (1961), pp. 133-215 and "The Oral-Formulaic Theory of Balladry – a Re-ebuttal," in *The Ballad Image. Essays Presented to Bertrand Harris Bronson*, ed. James Porter (Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore & Mythology,

analyses under the auspices of the present project are an implicit refutation, in suggesting memorization rather than improvisation as the basic process involved.

That project, in turn, offers and seeks to document the thesis, first propounded (if rather in passing) by Phillips Barry, that the central features of the balladic narrative mode are produced, within the individual song, in the course of its transmission in oral tradition.²² I would further suggest that the shaping forces of this tradition are both retrieval of the text from memory, and its performance under social (i.e. noisy, difficult) auspices, by skilled but essentially amateur performers. Again following Barry, the project documents its thesis by juxtaposing the original text of a song – invariably in the form of a broadside ballad – with its derivatives recorded from oral tradition (within the social and amateur auspices just specified) decades or even centuries later (typically from England, Scotland or North America in the last decades of the 19th century or the opening decades of the 20th century). Such a performance tradition is a ‘ballad machine’ generating, over time, balladic narrative features in what started out as mere narrative songs. While the original has few balladic features (it is a ‘ballad’ only in the strictly contextual sense of ‘broadside ballad’, and is characterized rather by the style of popular journalism), the oral derivatives have many more: they are on the way to becoming ‘ballads’ in the generic sense (i.e. ‘traditional ballads’) used in literary anthologies.²³

That this project may be of interest to historians as well as folklorists and literary critics is due to the circumstance already mentioned that it examines songs which recount ‘historical’ events in the sense of recent, authentic, and newsworthy occurrences, typically violent crimes and their judicial aftermath (trials and executions). In relation to methodology this is an almost inevitable consequence

University of California, 1983), pp. 173–91; Flemming G. Andersen & Thomas Pettitt, “Mrs. Brown of Falkland: A Singer of Tales?” *Journal of American Folklore*, 92 (1979), pp. 1–24.

²² Phillips Barry, “The Part of the Folk Singer in the Making of Folk Balladry,” in *The Critics and the Ballad*, eds. M. Leach and Tristram P. Coffin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pp. 59–76.

²³ The following publications by the present writer derive from this project: [with Flemming G. Andersen.] “‘The Murder of Maria Marten:’ The Birth of a Ballad?” in *Narrative Folksong: New Directions. Essays in Honour of W. Edson Richmond*, eds. Carol Edwards and Kathleen Manley (Los Angeles: Trickster Press, 1985), pp. 132–178; “‘Worn by the Friction of Time:’ Oral Tradition and the Generation of the Balladic Narrative Mode” [on the ‘Berkshire Tragedy’/‘Cruel Miller’], in *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative. The European Tradition*, ed. Roy Eriksen (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 341–372; “Ballad Singers and Ballad Style: The Case of the Murdered Sweethearts” [on ‘William Grismond’], in *The Entertainer in Medieval and Traditional Culture: A Symposium*, eds. Flemming G. Andersen et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 101–131; “The Ballad of Tradition: In Pursuit of a Vernacular Aesthetic” [on ‘James Harris’/‘The Daemon Lover’], in *Ballads into Books: The Legacies of Francis James Child*, eds. Tom Cheesman and Sigrid Rieuwerts (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 111–123. My current views on oral tradition more generally are offered in “I See a Voice: Oral Perspectives on Early European Verbal Culture,” Introduction to *Inclinatè Aurem, Proceedings of a Symposium* organized by Center for Medieval Studies, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, November 1998, forthcoming from Odense University Press (2001).

of the requirement that the point of departure for textual comparison be precisely the original text of a new song. For while many English folksongs, including narrative songs, survive on broadsides published much earlier than they were recorded from oral tradition, it cannot be ruled out that the oral version represents a tradition antedating the printed one. But with (broadside) news-ballads there is a likelihood verging on (a sometimes verifiable) certitude that the text we have was either issued shortly after the events it describes, or is a near verbatim reprint of one that did, and that any later oral versions are indeed derivative from it.²⁴ And by virtue of being news-ballads these songs also qualify as historical sources for the events they narrate, and may therefore be of significance for historians interested in the textualization of history (and in the detextualization and retextualization involved when the song is changed in transmission and subsequently recorded).

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The results of these experiments are indeed not particularly surprising; they were predictable and have often been asserted, but the approach reported and illustrated here allows such assertions to be made with much greater confidence. Thus in oral tradition these news ballads tend typically to shed the features – circumstantial, moralizing, sentimental, melodramatic – characteristic of the popular journalistic mode. This is in turn an aspect of the first major process involved, the *subtraction* of material inessential to the progress of the narrative or the rendition of the dramatic confrontations of which the narrative is built up. This is matched however by the second process, the *addition* of new material of a traditional nature, either from specific songs within the oral tradition, or more often in the form of features characteristic of that tradition as a whole. And this material can range from a narrative motif to formulaic lines or clusters of lines of the kind discussed above. These two processes, subtraction and addition, can sometimes occur simultaneously, producing the third process, *substitution*.²⁵ Taken together these processes produce many of the balladic qualities listed, as well as making the song sound, on a larger or smaller scale, more traditional. The ballad's characteristic repetition patterns are mainly produced, however, by the adjustment of verbal material within the song itself (if at any given phase of its textual evolution), typically by a process of internal 'contamination' in which two points linked in terms of content (e.g. question and answer; journey out, journey home) but expressed in differing formulations, approach or achieve verbal identity by the formulation at one point shifting closer to that at the other. There were, of course, no broadside ballads in the Middle Ages to be reshaped, in oral trans-

²⁴ One of the publications listed above, "The Ballad of Tradition: In Pursuit of a Vernacular Aesthetic," is an exception, in being based on a non-journalistic broadside ballad whose anterior dating is ascertainable by its explicit attribution to a known author.

²⁵ I deploy the simple but effective systematic terminology of Tom Burns, "A Model for Textual Variation in Folksong," *Folklore Forum*, 3 (1970), pp. 49-56.

mission, into traditional ballads, but there were other narrative songs, in other-than-balladic narrative modes, from other than skilled amateur auspices (minstrel romances and saints' lives, for example) which might enter and be processed by the 'ballad machine'.²⁶ This project would suggest that medieval ballads, like 'St Stephen and Herod', are created by this process, rather than being originally composed in the form that we know them with the balladic qualities fully developed.

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And while, in the case of songs, and taken together, these processes introduce specifically balladic features, some of these features of what I have termed the 'vernacular aesthetic' of tradition-borne textual material have a more general relevance as symptoms of oral transmission and can therefore be assigned a diagnostic function in other areas. That is to say a text of unknown provenance which displays features like verbal formulae and the traditional (as opposed to the deliberately rhetorical) varieties of verbal repetition is very likely to have been through an oral phase. Similarly, when confronted with two texts of the same work, the one that displays more of these features is most likely to derive, via oral transmission, from the other. It is this aspect of the project's results which has implications for Elizabethan drama.

That some of these processes do indeed occur in dramatic texts reproduced from memory was demonstrated in a fascinating experiment reported by Betty Shapin in 1944, since oddly neglected in work on Shakespearean texts.²⁷ In connection with the performance of a (modern) play by the Columbia University Theatre Associates, Shapin asked an actress, who had played a small part, to reconstruct three scenes of the play from memory. The circumstances were close to the proposed Elizabethan context for any memorial reconstruction as may have occurred in the sense that the play concerned was unpublished, and the actress involved had had access only to manuscript pages containing her own part. I give below extracts from the original text of the first passage and the memorial reconstruction in parallel.²⁸ Repetitions are indicated by underlining, and in some instances enhanced by realignment of the text:

Original

Reconstruction

B. All gone, boy?

B. All gone, boy?

...

...

N. It's all gone.

N. Tis the last of the peary.

There be no more peary.

²⁶ I have explored what might be an instance of this phenomenon in "'Bold Sir Rylas' and the Struggle for Ballad Form," *Lore and Language*, 3.6 (January, 1982), 45-60.

²⁷ Betty Shapin, "An Experiment in Memorial Reconstruction," *MLR*, 39 (1944), pp. 9-17, not invoked by Maguire in *Shakespearean Suspect Texts*. My thanks to Professor Maria Dobozy for bringing this study to my attention.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

- It was a bad year for pears.
- N.²⁹ Mistress do not allow that,
Goodman Burroughs.
The drink what you end on
must be the same as.
what you beg'in on.
- B. And be I to sit with empty tankard?
The peary is weak like water.
The cider do be no better.
- N. Mistress Morton? (*exit*)
- B. And be I to sit with empty tankard!
I be an Englishman, I be. (*exit*)
(*enter N. followed by E.*)
- E. What is't, Nathaniel?
- N. That Goodman Burroughs!
- ...
- E. Tell him I would speak with him.
- B. (*entering*) Here I be mistress.
- E. Goodman,
- ...
- Tis your last drink here today
in the Golden Lioness,
and it will cost you four times
its usual price.
- ...
- E. If you do leave here drunk,
I lose my licence.
- 'Twas a bad year for pears.
- N. No. You do know that
Mistress Morton says that
the drink that you end with
must be the same as
The drink that you begin with.
- B. The peary be weak like water
and the cider be no better.
- N. Mistress Morton! Mistress Morton!
- B. Be I to sit with an empty tankard?
I be an Englishman, I be. (*exit*)
(*enter N. followed by E.*)
- E. What is't, Nathaniel?
- N. It be that that Goodman Burroughs again.
- ...
- E. Tell him I would speak with him.
(*enter Burroughs*)
- E. Goodman Burroughs,
- ...
- You know if you do get drunk
I do lose my licence.
That drink will cost you twice
its usual cost
- and it is your last drink
at the Golden Lioness today.

While it must be acknowledged (as can sometimes happen in ballads) that the oral process has destroyed the original's one major verbal repetition, the reiteration of B.'s angry rhetorical question, 'And be I to sit with empty tankard' (13 : 17), this is more than compensated for by the smaller but numerous repetitions of word or phrase which have been generated by 'internal contamination' in the reconstructed text.³⁰

This experiment with drama confirms the indication provided by the study of narrative song, that when such repetitions are encountered in a 'bad' Shakespearean (or Marlovian) quarto, as they sometimes are, the generation of that text has in one way or another involved a passage though oral transmission.³¹ As a brief illustration we may take a few moments from the end of the ghost scene in *Hamlet* where the Prince urges his companions not to speak of what they have

²⁹ Thus in original: presumably in performance some action or gesture intervenes between N's two speeches.

³⁰ The phenomenon is, strangely, not noted by Shapin.

³¹ For a preliminary application of the results reported in the present study to Elizabethan drama, see my "The Living Text: The Play, the Players, and Folk Tradition," in *Porci ante Margaritam: Essays in Honour of Meg Twycross*, eds. S. Carpenter, P. King and P. Meredith (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 2001), pp. 413-429.

seen, and then to leave with him. In re-generating the first Folio text, not printed until 1623 but close to what Shakespeare wrote, the 'bad' quarto of 1603, while also spoiling one original repetition pattern, manages to produce two others through internal contamination:

F1 (1623)

837 Neuer make known
 what you haue seene to night
 850 Neuer to speake
 of this that you haue seene
 856 Neuer to speake
 of this that you haue heard
 883 ... let vs goe in together
 887 Nay, come let's go together

Q1 (1603)

601 Neuer make knowne
 what you haue seene to night
 612 Neuer to speake
 what you haue seene to night
 617 neuer to speake
 of that which you haue seene.
 643 Nay come let's go together
 647 Nay come lett's go together.³²

000

It remains to be seen to what degree if any this methodology contradicts Andrew Taylor's pessimistic remark, in a broader, medieval, context, that 'no text will ever be able to establish that a particular written text is the direct and uncontaminated transcription of a single oral performance',³³ and the value both of this potential contribution to Shakespearean philology and of any other application of these insights will stand or fall on the validity of the thesis asserted here on what oral transmission does to texts. But this in turn, in best scientific fashion, is eminently subject to confirmation, refutation or adjustment through repeating the experiment concerned: comparing derivative oral song texts with their broadside original. And by way of illustration a conveniently straightforward (and conveniently short) instance is provided by an English song concerning the sorry fate of a certain W. Warner, T. Ward and T. Williams, who were executed for highway robbery following their trial at Warwick, on 14 July 1818. That this experiment can be undertaken is due entirely to the good work and generosity of Mike Yates, who both uncovered this material and kindly sanctioned my use and reproduction of it here.³⁴

This case indeed is one for which we have multiple sources of information, in that the trial was also reported in *The Warwick Advertiser* from August 1818 (this delay may explain why the title of the broadside, inaccurately, gives the date of the execution as 14 August). Indeed the range of document-types is increased by the

³² *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*, eds. Paul Bertram and Bemice Kliman (New York: AMS Press, 1991). My thanks to Lene Buhl Petersen for bringing this instance to my attention.

³³ Andrew Taylor, "Was There a Song of Roland?" *Speculum*, 76 (2001), pp. 28-65, p. 63, n. 149.

³⁴ For the circumstances of the discovery, and the texts involved, see Mike Yates, "Three Brothers in Fair Warwickshire: A Ballad and its Story," *English Dance and Song*, 45 (1983), pp. 2-4.

fact that one of the reports includes (one presumes verbatim) a judicial record (unlikely to survive elsewhere) in the form of a confession made to a magistrate by one of the robbers, and so narrating the events from his perspective – if with the usual reservations about ‘fiction in the archives’. It would be an interesting historiographical project to compare the broadside with these alternative sources,³⁵ and as a small contribution to that end, and by way of introducing the story, I give here firstly the opening of the account in the *Warwick Advertiser* (which probably reproduces the wording of the indictment), secondly part of the confession (of William Warner) mentioned above, and thirdly part of the evidence given to the trial (also as reported in the *Warwick Advertiser*) by the victim of the robbery, here (in accordance with the legal technicalities of the time) referred to as the ‘Prosecutor’:

#1 William Warner, alias *Hard-hearing baby* (aged 20); Thos. Ward, alias *Jasper* (aged 18); and Thos. Williams, alias *Stodger* (aged 19); were indicted for a violent assault upon the person of George Greenway, on the King’s highway, and taking from his person, a silver watch, value £5, a gold chain, value £8, two gold seals, value £6, a silver snuff box, value 2 Guineas, and several Country Banknotes, value £26, on the 1st of July last in the parish of Nuneaton. The Prisoners pleaded guilty. ...

#2 [William Warner confesses] that when they had arrived within a mile of Nuneaton, they saw a person approaching them on horseback, whom they immediately agreed to stop and rob; that the man, called Stodger, caught hold of the bridle, and with a large stick struck him and knocked him off his horse; that Thomas Ward then took from the person’s pockets, some bank notes, of which examinant thinks three were of the value of one pound each, and two of five pounds each; that examinant caught hold of his watch chain, and drew his watch out of his pocket; that they then proceeded across the country

#3 On the 1st of July, he [George Greenway] went to Hinckley, upon professional business, and left that place, on horse-back, as the chimes of the parish church played nine. He had passed the Harrow Inn, and proceeded about two miles beyond the turnpike gate, which is but a short distance from Nuneaton, when he saw three men on the right hand side of the road. He was then riding at his usual pace of about 4 1/2 miles an hour; and the night was remarkable light. The men, on perceiving the Prosecutor, crossed the road, and on his coming up within a few paces of the spot where they stood, they separated. and made up to him in three different directions. One of them instantly aimed a blow at Mr. Greenway’s head; it fell upon his left temple, and occasioned a very copious discharge of blood. The three ruffians instantly seized the Prosecutor, who was nearly insensible, from the effects of the violent blow he had received, and dragged him from his horse. When they had got him upon the ground, one of them knelt upon his chest, while the other two, one on each side, rifled his pockets. They took from him the several articles mentioned in the indictment, and to the value of about £50. Mr. Greenway, who was fearful that they would do him some serious injury, entreated them to spare his life, as they got all the property he had about him. They soon after left him

It is a striking illustration of the different poetics and purposes of even journalistic broadside narrative that these detailed and circumstantial accounts are covered by only two stanzas (3-4: see the text below), which select as significant the blow on the head, and the theft of the watch. Unlike the legal process (in

³⁵ See the study on ‘Maria Marten’ cited above for an analogous case.

which it may have determined whether the offence was capital) the broadside is not interested in the value of the money and property stolen, but it does (perhaps because of the human interest factor) share a concern with the ages of the offenders, which are reported accurately, and which qualify them as 'three young men' (st. 1.2). Otherwise (taking the sources as a whole) the broadside also specifies places (Nuneaton for the crime; Warwick for the trial and execution), the name of the victim, and the plea of guilty (although it omits the Judge's strenuous exertions to get the prisoners to change their plea).

But for reasons explained earlier the present article will focus on a further stage in the trajectory of this narrative, and compare the original song with a version recorded from oral tradition a century and a half later. For by one of those small miracles of folkloristics, Mike Yates encountered in Gloucester a gypsy, Danny Brazil, from whom he recorded a version of this song on 19 February 1978; this is apparently the first time the song has been recorded from tradition after the publication of the original broadside in 1818. Parallel complete texts of the two versions follow, the underlining signalling repetition patterns featuring in subsequent discussion:³⁶

PRINTED ORIGINAL

*The Lamentation of W. Warner T. Ward
& T. Williams, who were executed at
Warwick, August 14, 1818,
for highway robbery.*

Broadside. T. Bloomer, Birmingham
[prob. 1818]

ORAL DERIVATIVE

'Three Brothers in Fair Warwickshire'

Recorded by Mike Yates from the singing
of Danny Brazil, Gloucester, 19.2.78.

1. It's melancholy to relate
Of three young men who met their fate
Cut of [sic] just in the bloom of day,
For robbing in the king's highway.

2. At Nuneaton in Warwickshire
We lived as you soon shall hear,
But in our station not content,
To rob and plunder we were bent,

3. Mr. Greenway was the first we met,
And by us he was soon beset
With a dreadful blow upon the head,

1. All for three brothers in fair Warwickshire
Three daring brothers you all shall hear
To rob and plunder was their intent
To go robbing along the highway they went.

2. The first they met it was Lord Granuvalle
With his coach and four there they did rebay
The heavy blow struck him on the head

³⁶ The extracts from the Warwick Advertiser, the broadside and the oral version are all printed in Yates, 'Three Brothers in Fair Warwickshire: A Ballad and its Story'. The original of the broadside text is in the Cecil Sharp Scrapbook of Songs and Ballads (p. 193), Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, London, and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the English Folk Dance and Song Society through the good offices of their Librarian, Malcolm Taylor. I have introduced the conventional stanza divisions which are not signalled in the original, but which are confirmed in the other broadside printings (see below) and by the oral version.

- We left him as we thought for dead. And they left him on the highway for dead.
4. His money and his watch also
We took, which proved our overthrow,
And then we ran away with speed,
And left him on the road to bleed.
 5. But for the crime we soon were ta'en
And sent to Warwick for the same;
To be confined in prison strong,
Till the Assizes did come on.
 6. When at the bar we did appear,
We pleaded guilty as you shall hear,
The jury all the same did cry,
And we were condemned to die.
 7. As for the ages of all three,

Is eighteen, nineteen and twenty;
It must be awful for to see,
Such young men at the fatal tree.
 3. They took his watch and his money too
So soon they proved his sad overthrow
They run away its with all their speed
And they left him on the highway to bleed.
 4. Now they were taken all for the same
They were put in prison 'till the trials came
They were put in prison bound in iron strong
Until the Assize it did come on.
 5. Now at the Bar these three young men 'peared
They was pleading guilty as you all shall hear
The Judge and Jurymen all did say
For its they are cast and condemned to die.
 6. 'The names, the names have you young men three
Your names, your names you come tell to me
My name's Will Atkins from once I came
Yes and many a time I have heard your name.'
 7. 'The age, the age have you young men three
Your age, your age you can tell to me
'One eighteen, nineteen and other twenty'
Isn't it a shocking and a sight to see
Three clever young men on the gallows tree.
 8. Now at the Bar their poor mother 'peared
She was wringing of her tender hands
tearing out her hair
Saying 'Judge and Jurymen spare their lives
For they are my sons and my heart's delight.'
 9. 'It's go you home dearest woman dear
You have come too late for the time is near
Tomorrow morning at the hour of three
You can claim their bodies from
the gallows tree.'
 10. 'It's go you home dearest woman dear
You have come too late for our time its near
Tomorrow morning that is the day
From all our friends we must die away.'
 8. All you that come to see us die,
Upon the gallows tree so high,
Shun every vice and take good ways,
Then you may all see happy days.
 11. Come all you people that is standing by
, That have come here for to see us die
You shun bad company take to good ways
That's the way to live and see happy days.
 9. We hope none will reflect upon

Our friends when we are dead and gone
 For if they do they're much to blame,
 Since we have suffered for the same.

Comparison of these two texts largely confirms the assertions offered earlier, if, as always, with some not altogether expected features which may prompt refinement of the thesis. And the changes may be assumed to represent the impact of transmission: while the broadside text may have been reprinted (pretty well verbatim) on later occasions (potentially shortening the length of transmission producing our oral version) there are no signs (as is sometimes the case with broadsides originally printed in the seventeenth century) of a later, revised broadside which may be responsible for some of the changes.³⁷

The juxtaposition shows clearly enough that there has been some *subtraction*: it amounts to only two stanzas, but this is significant given that the original has only nine stanzas. It is also striking that the stanzas omitted are the first and last, comprising (most of) the classic broadside packaging of the narrative with an opening comment by the narrator and a concluding, admonitory valediction to the reader/listener in the mouth(s) of the condemned criminal(s). The fact that the seven stanzas of the original which do survive do so in their original order indicates that the transmission has largely been based on memory, although substantial alteration at the sub-stanzaic level has occurred along the way.

The most striking feature here is the extent of the *additions* to the song which have occurred in the course of transmission, no less than four of the oral version's eleven stanzas having no equivalent in the original. This is a far from universal occurrence in the songs studied in this project, some of which exclusively (at the stanzaic level) display subtraction, and this is the first time I have encountered an oral derivative which is actually longer than the printed original. On the other hand addition *has* been discerned in other songs, and this song conforms to the thesis in the sense that all the material added is in itself traditional, and/or generated by traditional processes.

With regard to the latter, for example, the first 'new' stanza of the oral version (st. 6, 'The names, the names ...') introduced between the original's stanzas 6 and 7, is clearly generated out of the latter stanza by repetition-with-variation (the result is often referred to as 'incremental repetition' in ballad studies): the judge's question about the ages of the condemned men is now matched by an analogous question about their names, with a closely parallel formulation:

³⁷ The Cecil Sharp Scapbook of Songs and Ballads at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, London, contains three versions of this song on broadsides, one (at p. 193) together with another song, 'Hodge & Kate's Courtship', another (at p. 194), also printed by T. Bloomer of Birmingham (with only insignificant verbal corrections, for example 'off' for 'of' in l.3) printed together with 'Dick the Joiner'; the third (at p. 261) is identical with the first, and was printed together with 'The Girl I adore'. This does suggest however that we might not be dealing here with the very first printing, which is more likely, in view of the song's newsworthiness, to have been without an accompanying song.

The names, the names	have you young men three
The age, the age	have you young men three
Your names, your names	you come tell to me
Your age, your age	you can tell to me.

It will also be noticed that the original question about the ages has itself bifurcated into two lines, its repetition matching, perhaps even prompted by the 'new' and repeated question about the names: a hankering after traditional structures evidently strong enough to tolerate a five-line stanza.

The other major addition combines the insertion of traditional material with the generation of new material by traditional means. The intervention in a trial of a relative pleading for the life of the condemned criminal is a familiar feature in popular narrative song (which is evidently where she comes from: there is no sign of any intervention in the newspaper accounts). Within the corpus of traditional balladry the closest analogue to the present case is probably 'Geordie' (No. 209 in Child's canonical collection), one version of which, recorded from oral delivery in Somerset in 1908, parallels the specific detail of the intervention (in this case, by the sweetheart) coming 'too late' to help the condemned person (here a poacher):

The judge looked over his left shoulder,
And said, 'I'm sorry for thee.
My pretty fair maid, you come too late,
For he's condemned already.'³⁸

The addition of this intervention produces a more (and more traditionally) structured narrative, with a balance between two major scenes, the robbery and the mother's plea, linked by the intervening condemnation. The original reaches an early climax with the robbery, and then tapers off with a brief evocation of the trial and its aftermath.

It is worth noting in passing that logically the insertion in our song of this plea by 'their poor mother' cannot have taken place before, or may have triggered, a change towards the traditional elsewhere in the text which transformed the historical W. Warner, T. Ward and T. Williams into the 'three brothers' endemic to folk tradition (1.1). Then at some point, before, during or after the process of insertion, the reply in which the Mother is told her plea is 'too late' bifurcated into two, just like (and providing a parallel to) the Judge's question(s) just discussed, with replies by, respectively, the Judge and the condemned men, producing another case of incremental repetition, with the first two and a half lines duplicated verbatim:

³⁸ Collected by Cecil Sharp from the singing of Charles Nevill of East Coker, Somerset, 1908; *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, eds. R. Vaughan Williams and A.L. Lloyd (1959; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 42. See also "The Clerk's Twa Sons O Owsenford," in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Child, #72A9-10, C29-30.

It's go you home dearest woman dear
 You have come too late for the time is near
 Tomorrow morning ... (9/10)

and the last line and a half varying (providing an increment):

... at the hour of three
 You can claim their bodies from the gallows tree (9)

... that is the day
 From all our friends we must die away (10)

Inspected more closely, the stanza narrating and quoting the mother's plea (st. 8) is itself a microcosm of this mixture of processes. It is built up partly of phrases repeated from st. 5 – 'Now at the Bar their poor mother 'peared / She was ...-ing' (8.1-2, cf. 5.1-2: 'Now at the Bar these three young men appeared / They was ...-ing'), 'Judge and Jurymen' (8.3, cf. 5.3), and 'For they are ...' (8.4, cf. 5.4) – as a result of which these two stanzas are now linked by verbal repetition, partly by phrases introduced from outside the text, some of which are almost certainly formulaic within this genre of song, e.g. 'Wringing of her tender hands tearing out her hair' (8.2)³⁹ and 'my heart's delight' (8.4).

This brings us to the two verbal features which characterize the style of the oral version, and which conform to the model of change posited above, the presence of formulaic phraseology, and the generation of repetition patterns. With regard to the former, I would anticipate that, in addition to the lines just mentioned, the following phrases, new to the oral version, might prove to be formulaic: '... was their intent' (1.4), 'The first they met ...' (2.1), 'bound in iron strong' (4.3), '... you come tell to me' (6.2), 'on the gallows tree' (7.5), 'the time is near' (9.2), and of course, 'Come all you ...' (11.1). With regard to repetition patterns several of the more striking instances have been mentioned already, others are indicated by underlinings in the text above. Perhaps the smallest, but still, I think significant, is the way two quite similar phrases in the original (2.2 : 6.2) achieve identity in the oral version (1.2 : 5.2):

... you soon shall hear,
 ... you shall hear,

... you all shall hear
 ... you all shall hear.

The reference to 'the [king's] highway' which was lost with the subtraction of st. 1 reappears twice in the derivative, providing a repetition between what are now sts. 1 and 2, and the phrase 'three young men' lost under the same circumstances produces phrasal repetitions by finding refuge in stanzas 5, 6 and 7. In a

³⁹ Tearing the hair is of course a formulaic gesture of the distraught mother in many narrative traditions: it is resorted to ('sparsisque crinibus') by the mother of a boy run over by a cart, later miraculously restored by the intervention Saint Richard of Chichester, in a thirteenth-century account cited in the paper tabled at the conference by Michael Goodich ('The Use of Direct Quotation from Canonization Hearing to Hagiographical Vita et Miracula').

somewhat similar fashion 'the gallows tree' lost as the original's stanza 8 became the derivative stanza 11 reappears both in a retained stanza (7.5, replacing the 'fatal tree' of 7.4) and in an added stanza (9.4).

Some changes, finally, seem designed to help the text fit more comfortably into the four-line framework constituted by the melodic structure. The oral derivative, reflecting the practicalities of performance, operates much more emphatically with one-line units, and almost systematically demolishes the enjambement which occurs in the original, whose composition was more under the constraint of the rhyme scheme, which facilitated two-line sense-units:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 2. At Nuneaton in Warwickshire
We lived as you soon shall hear, | 1. All for three brothers in fair Warwickshire
Three daring brothers you all shall hear |
| 4. His money and his watch also
We took, which proved our overthrow, | 3. They took his watch and his money too
So soon they proved his sad overthrow |
| 7. As for the ages of all three,

Is eighteen, nineteen and twenty; | 7. 'The age, the age have you young men three
Your age, your age you can tell to me'
'One eighteen, nineteen and other twenty' |

Such detailed verbal analysis may fascinate the philologically inclined, but historians may be more interested in those additions, subtractions and substitutions which in a more general sense transmute this journalistic account of a specific event into a more 'traditional' narrative of a personal tragedy. The first-person statement typical of the 'goodnight' genre of the condemned criminal's confession and lament has modulated (except for the truncated closing valediction) into a third person narrative. And this is now altogether more dramatic: while the original has no direct speech the derivative converts its statement (st. 7) about the ages of the men into a question and answer (st. 7), duplicated in the analogous question and answer (st. 6) about their names. Similarly the added scene with the traditional relative's plea is also traditionally dramatic in that two and a half of its three stanzas comprise direct speech. Over a third of the oral version is therefore in dialogue.

This is matched by a drift from the specific to the traditional in empirical information. Thus while we retain Warwickshire it is now the more poetical 'fair Warwickshire', and we lose Nuneaton. We also lose the individual names of the criminals, as already mentioned, as part of the process by which they become three brothers (and their deaths therefore a more stark, indeed ballad-like, family tragedy). That the tragedy is reinforced by their youth (underlined by the appearance of their mother to plead for their lives) probably explains why their specific ages, in contrast, are retained. But while still young they are more heroic: not merely three brothers but three 'daring' brothers (1.2) for whom to rob and plunder 'was their intent', a narrative role more than a symptom (as in the original) of social discontent (2.3). Danny Brazil's stanza six may show the song poised on the brink of another shift away from the historical towards the traditional. It focusses on a single figure (only one robber gives his name, and it is

not one of the original names) apparently with an established notoriety: 'and many a time have I heard your name' says the Judge (6.4). The name specified, 'Will Atkins', may indeed have had some currency in popular eighteenth-century tradition on robbers and renegades: it was used by Daniel Defoe for the most bloodthirsty of the mutineers who at the end of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are abandoned on the desert island.⁴⁰ There is a corresponding shift in the identity and character of their victim: the real and rather prosaic 'Mr. Greenway' (3.1) becomes a figure better qualified as the antagonist of highway robbers, 'Lord Granuvale' (2.1) who is even supplied with a dashing 'coach and four' (2.2) not mentioned in the original and which far outdoes the historical Mr. Greenway's locomotion on horseback 'riding at his usual pace of about 4 1/2 miles an hour'.

ooo

For a literary historian (and for a rather old-fashioned folklorist) the results of this experiment and the others which preceded it are altogether positive: it is widely agreed that in aesthetic terms most broadside ballads are 'trash,' but their traditional derivatives, as the above discussion may have indicated, tend more closely towards the simple but stark directness of the traditional ballad which has generally been much appreciated. But for a historian of events there are grounds for concern. If 'oral tradition' can do what we have just seen it do to a historical narrative which was already textualized, and whose narrative and textual stability, at least for a while, will have been supported by the availability of printed texts, what – by way of addition, subtraction and substitution, and conformity to existing paradigms – could not a medieval oral history achieve, less disciplined by textuality and literacy, and in the full flood of religious enthusiasm, superstitious terror or patriotic zeal?

⁴⁰ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by Angus Ross, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965; repr. 1976), esp. p. 264; the same character, reformed and industrious, reappears in Defoe's sequel, *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (also 1719).

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THE SPOKEN WORD IN CONTEXT

Edited by Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Richter

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

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CEU MEDIEVALIA

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Oral History of the Middle Ages

The Spoken Word in Context

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**GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER ABTEILUNG
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DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG**

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Cover illustration: The wife of Potiphar covets Joseph: "... erat autem Joseph pulchra facie et decorus aspectu: post multos itaque dies iecit domina oculos suis in Ioseph et ait dormi mecum." ("... And Joseph was [a] goodly [person], and well favoured. And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me."), Gen. 39: 6-7 (KJV). Concordantiae Caritatis, c. 1350. Cistercian abbey of Lilienfeld (Lower Austria), ms 151, fol. 244v (detail). Photo: Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit (Krems an der Donau).

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Preface

Oral culture played an instrumental role in medieval society.¹ Due to the lack of any direct source evidence, however, research into the functions and importance of oral communication in the Middle Ages must confront a number of significant problems. Only indirect traces offer the opportunity to analyze phenomena that were based on or connected with the spoken word. The 'oral history' of the Middle Ages requires the application of different approaches than dealing with the 20th or 21st century.

For some decades Medieval Studies have been interested in questions of orality and literacy, their relationship and the substitution of the spoken by the written word.² Oral and literate culture were not exclusive and certainly not opposed to each other.³ The 'art of writing' was part of the 'ars rhetorica' and writing makes no sense without speech.⁴ Any existing written statement should also be seen as a spoken one, although, clearly, not every oral statement as a written one. Authors regularly wrote with oral delivery in mind. 'Speaking' and 'writing' are not antonyms.

It is also obvious that "the use of oral communication in medieval society should not be evaluated . . . as a function of *culture populaire* vis-à-vis *culture savante* but, rather, of the communication habits and the tendency of medieval man

¹ For the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, cf. Willem Frijhoff, "Communication et vie quotidienne à la fin du moyen âge et à l'époque moderne: réflexions de théorie et de méthode," in *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsbichler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), p. 24: "La plupart de gens vivait encore pour l'essentiel dans une culture orale et les procédés d'appropriation des idées passaient de préférence par la parole dite et écoutée, quand bien même on était capable d'une lecture visuelle plus ou moins rudimentaire."

² See Marco Mostert, "New Approaches to Medieval Communication?" in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. 15-37; Michael Richter, "Die Entdeckung der 'Oralität' der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft durch die neuere Mediävistik," in *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz (Bochum: D. Winkler, 2000), pp. 273-287.

³ Peter Burke calls the construct of "oral versus literate" useful but at the same time dangerous: idem, "Mündliche Kultur und >Druckkultur< im spätmittelalterlichen Italien," in *Volkskultur des europäischen Spätmittelalters*, eds. Peter Dinzelbacher and Hans-Dieter Mück (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1987), p. 60.

⁴ Michael Clanchy, "Introduction," in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), p. 6.

to share his intellectual experiences in the corporate framework.”⁵ Oral delivery was not “the sole prerogative of any socioeconomic class.”⁶

For all these reasons, it is important to analyze the extent of and context, in which ‘speech acts,’ auditive effects, and oral tradition occur in medieval sources.⁷ Research into the use of the spoken word or references to it in texts and images provides new insight into various, mainly social, rules and patterns of the communication system. It opens up additional approaches to the organization and complexity of different, but indispensably related, media in medieval society, and their comparative analysis.⁸

The spoken word is connected with the physical presence of its ‘sender.’ Speech may represent the authenticity of the given message in a more obvious way than written texts or images. Therefore, the use of ‘speech acts’ in written or visual evidence also has to be seen in context with the attempt to create, construct, or prove authenticity. Moreover, spoken messages contribute to and increase the life-likeness of their contents, which may influence their perception by the receiver, their efficacy and success. Being aware of such a situation will have led to the explicit and intended use and application of the spoken word in written texts and images – to increase their authenticity and importance, too.

If one operates with a model of ‘closeness’ and ‘distance’ of communication with regard to the level of relation of ‘senders’ and ‘receivers,’ then the ‘speech acts’ or their representation have to be seen as contributors to a ‘closer’ connection among the participants of the communication process.⁹ At the same time, however, speech might be evaluated as less official. One regularly comes across ‘oral space’

⁵ Sophia Menache, *The Vox Dei. Communication in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 19.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 21. Cf. also Jan-Dirk Müller, “Zwischen mündlicher Anweisung und schriftlicher Sicherung von Tradition. Zur Kommunikationsstruktur spätmittelalterlicher Fechtbücher,” in *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsichler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), p. 400: “Offensichtlich sind schriftliche und nichtschriftliche Tradierung von Wissen weiterhin relativ unabhängig voneinander, nachdem die Schrift längst dazu angesetzt hat, Inseln der Mündlichkeit oder praktisch-enaktiver Wissensvermittlung zu erobern. Die Gedächtnisstütze kann die Erfahrung nicht ersetzen, sondern allenfalls reaktivieren. Sie ist sogar nur verständlich, wo sie auf anderweitig vermittelte Vorkenntnisse stößt.”

⁷ Cf. W.F.H. Nicolaisen, ed., *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1995).

⁸ See, esp., Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen, Schrift und Bild. Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995), passim.

⁹ See also Stefan Sonderegger, “>Gesprochen oder nur geschrieben?< Mündlichkeit in mittelalterlichen Texten als direkter Zugang zum Menschen,” in *Homo Medietas. Aufsätze zu Religiosität, Literatur und Denkformen des Menschen vom Mittelalter bis in die Neuzeit. Festschrift für Alois Maria Haas zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde and Niklaus Largier (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 665: “Jedenfalls darf man sich bewußt bleiben, daß auch in den Texten des deutschen Mittelalters die Reflexe gesprochener Sprache eine bedeutende Schicht ausmachen, die besonders dann immer wieder hervortritt, wenn es um einen direkten Zugang zum Menschen geht, um ein Verstehen aus unmittelbarer Partnerschaft heraus ...”

that has become institutionalized or more official by the application of 'written space'.¹⁰ Simultaneous employment of such different levels and qualities of messages must often have had considerable influence on their efficacy.¹¹

The papers in this volume are the outcome of an international workshop that was held in February, 2001, at the Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest. Participants concentrated on problems of the occurrence, usage, and patterns of the spoken word in written and visual sources of the Middle Ages. They dealt with the role and contents of direct and indirect speech in textual evidence or in relation to it, such as chronicles, travel descriptions, court and canonization protocols, sermons, testaments, law-books, literary sources, drama, etc. They also tried to analyze the function of oral expression in connection with late medieval images.

The audiovisuality of medieval communication processes¹² has proved to be evident and, thus, important for any kind of further comparative analysis of the various levels of the 'oral-visual-literate,' i.e. multimedia culture of the Middle Ages. Particular emphasis has to be put on methodological problems, such as the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches,¹³ or the question of the extent to which we are, generally, able to comprehend and to decode the communication systems of the past.¹⁴ Moreover, the medievalist does not come across any types of sources in which oral communication represents the main concern.¹⁵ Instead, she or he is confronted, at first glance, with a great variety of 'casual' and 'marginal' evidence.

We would like to thank all the contributors to the workshop and to this volume. Their cooperation made it possible to publish the results of the meeting in the same year in which it took place. This can be seen as a rare exception, at least in the world of the historical disciplines. The head, faculty, staff, and students of the Department of Medieval Studies of Central European University offered various help and support. Special thanks go to Judith Rasson, the copy editor of

¹⁰ This, e.g., could be well shown in a case study on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: Friederike Hassauer, "Schriftlichkeit und Mündlichkeit im Alltag des Pilgers am Beispiel der Wallfahrt nach Santiago de Compostela," in *Wallfahrt und Alltag in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, eds. Gerhard Jaritz and Barbara Schuh (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), pp. 277-316.

¹¹ Cf. Bob Scribner, "Mündliche Kommunikation und Strategien der Macht in Deutschland im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsbieler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), pp. 183-197.

¹² Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, p. 292.

¹³ Cf. Ursula Schaefer, "Zum Problem der Mündlichkeit," in *Modernes Mittelalter. Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, ed. Joachim Heinze (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1994), pp. 374 f.

¹⁴ Frijhoff, "Communication et vie quotidienne," p. 25: "Sommes-nous encore en mesure de communiquer avec la communication de jadis?"

¹⁵ Michael Richter, *Sprache und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Untersuchungen zur mündlichen Kommunikation in England von der Mitte des elften bis zu Beginn des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1979), p. 22.

this volume, who took particular care with the texts of the many non-native speakers fighting with the pitfalls of the English language.

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