

**Song, Text, and Cassette:  
Why We Need Authoritative Audio  
Editions of Medieval Literary Works**

**Ward Parks**

Since its inception, the medievalist's profession has always been centered around texts. The same could be said, of course, for most humanistic study. Yet for the medievalist, working in historical eras beyond the outreach of untextualized cultural memory, and in language dialects that, without texts, would have perished before the juggernaut of linguistic change, the inevitability of the text as the starting point of inquiry seems like a fact beyond dispute. The hazard that this state of affairs brings with it is that researchers may mistake the exigencies of their profession for the realities of medieval life. Texts and textuality played a dynamic and ever-increasing role in medieval civilization, to be sure. Yet we cannot take it for granted that the Middle Ages were textualized to that degree or in those ways that the textualized viewpoint of a modern print society might lead us to suppose. A spate of recent scholarship has indeed underscored the depth and complexity of orality-literacy relations in the Middle Ages and after.<sup>1</sup>

My purpose here is to advocate the use of these new facilities towards the better understanding of the past. Specifically, as a community of scholars, we ought to undertake systematic sponsorship and production of audio-cassette editions of medieval literature. This publication—and we should conceive of it in this honorific sense—should merely spearhead a comprehensive revamping of scholarly practice towards the recuperation of medieval discourse as sound. Audio editions, in conjunction with printed

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Clanchy 1979, Ong 1982, Saenger 1982, Stock 1983, and Zumthor 1987, O'Keeffe 1990, and the recent anthologies of essays edited by Pasternack and Doane (1991). Representative of a growing interest in related problems in eighteenth-century studies is Carrithers 1989.

editions, should be regarded as primary sources on which literary critics can ground research and interpretation. In the domain of pedagogy, oral performance—both live and taped—should be incorporated into the medievalist's training, so that students become accustomed to *hearing* and *speaking* medieval literature in addition to reading it visually. The institution of these practices would benefit medieval studies in many ways. Not only would it open channels into a largely forgotten dimension of medieval experience and so stimulate fresh lines of inquiry, but it would make what is sometimes a rather arcane discipline more attractive to outsiders and newcomers. Indeed, in such innovative and forward-looking uses of the electronic media, medievalists, contrary to stereotype, are peculiarly fitted to march in the scholarly vanguard.

The medievalist's inauguration of serious scholarly research methodology into the world of electronic sound must, in the course of time, follow if we do no more than merely to accept the invitation of our subject matter. For several decades oral-formulaic scholarship has been arguing that epic poems such as the *Iliad* or *Beowulf* or the *Chanson de Roland* drew on oral traditions that entailed not merely live rendering of poetic composition before a listening audience but, to one degree or another, composition *in* performance.<sup>2</sup> While poetic extemporization might seem a forbidding task to textualized moderns, we know as a certainty, from Serbo-Croatian and other analogous material, that it can be done, not through bedazzling acts of creation *ex nihilo*, but through traditional processes—such as formulaic composition—that a poet has mastered over the course of a lifetime. Now it has not been possible to prove to the satisfaction of all that any extant medieval poem is itself the direct transcription of oral performance. Indeed, oral-formulaists today generally agree that no textual criterion or set of criteria—including Parry's "test" of orality—can differentiate unequivocally between an oral and a written

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<sup>2</sup> This view, which was first fully articulated by Milman Parry (whose works are collected in *The Making of Homeric Verse*, 1971), received its classic formulation in Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960). Because "oral studies" is only beginning to be recognized as its own discipline, oral-formulaic and related scholarship has long been scattered centrifugally through other fields, creating forbidding difficulties for the prospective researcher. In recent years these problems have been greatly alleviated, largely through the efforts of John Foley; see especially his annotated bibliography (1985) and introduction (1988). Annotated bibliographies now appear regularly in *Oral Tradition*. For bibliographic surveys of Old and Middle English respectively, see Olsen 1986, 1988 and Parks 1986.

poem.<sup>3</sup> Oral residue persisted long into the age of literacy, and oral-formulaic rhetoric, as Alain Renoir has argued at length, appears in a diversity of works, some of them unmistakably of lettered authorship.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it would be unreasonable to deny that traditions of oral storytelling underlie much extant medieval poetry in some way; how else could the *Beowulf*-poet, for example, have become acquainted with his early Germanic legendry? And while no positive proof can be adduced, living traditions of oral poetic composition may well have persisted, in one sociological pocket or another, throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> In either case, oral traditional models would have impacted on the phenomenology of medieval narrative discourse.

What would this impact have been? How does an oral traditional perception of literary discourse differ from that of a textualized society? The fundamental difference lies in the extent to which an oral poem is an *event* rather than a *thing*.<sup>6</sup> Now it is true that a text too must happen if it is to communicate. At the very least, an author must write it and a reader must read it. Yet the thingness of a book obtrudes far more than does the thingness of an oral performance. Indeed, a book stands between parties in a written communication act, in that such communication requires that they

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<sup>3</sup> David Bynum has pointed out that, while many medievalists have engaged in formula-counting, few have followed the careful procedures that Parry himself observed (1978:3-13). Nonetheless, whatever might be said for the test's reliability regarding the Greek and Serbo-Croatian epics for which it was designed, it plainly does not work without modification for a poetic tradition like the Anglo-Saxon that has symmetrical half-lines and makes wide use of variation; on these matters see Fry 1967 and Foley 1981. For a moderate and perspicuous treatment of formularity in *Beowulf*, see Niles 1983:121-38. Old English studies remain, nonetheless, quite divided on issues of orality and literacy; for two recent books that illustrate opposite tendencies, see O'Keeffe 1990 and Lerer 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Explorations in oral-formulaic rhetoric, irrespective of the actual mode of composition, are the main concern in Renoir's *A Key to Old English Poems* (1988). Irving's *Rereading Beowulf* (1989) similarly stresses the importance of oral-formulaic backgrounds.

<sup>5</sup> In later medieval English, the poetry that most probably registers the imprint of such oral traditions, whether directly or at some level of textual remove, belongs to the so-called Alliterative Revival; for a review of pertinent scholarship on this issue, see Parks 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Much of the following draws on my fuller discussions in Parks 1986, 1989, and 1991.

do not interact with each other directly but rather with the text as a physical object intermediary. The writer's writing and the reader's reading unfold typically as solitary acts at different times and places; frequently these persons never meet face to face. An oral performance, by contrast, is spun out at a time and place common to singer and audience. A word or phrase grips the common consciousness for as long as it is physically voiced; when a singer moves on to a new word or phrase, the narrative present changes for all, or at least for all who are paying attention. The vocalization and the immediate linguistic deciphering of auditory sense impressions must occur with near simultaneity, that is, in common public time. Thus the eventuality of oral performance comes to the foreground as immediately shared experience, as it cannot for writers and readers, whose separate encounters are with the physical text.

Because humans are social creatures, the public performance model was liable to have environed the literary imagination to a greater or lesser degree long after writing and reading had come into play. Even solitary writers and readers, in their individual textual performances, may have imaginatively resurrected an oral performance as the optimal setting for the enactment and consummation of a literary text. And the writerly deployment of oral-formulaic rhetoric, as discussed by Renoir (1988), may have catered to precisely such a sensibility. Yet oral-formulaic matters aside, other new modes of reading and interpretive discourse that the Middle Ages gave rise to, though they entailed a degree of textual engagement far beyond what an oral *scop* would have envisioned, retained nonetheless vital links with the world of orality and sound. Until silent perusals became customary, for example, monastic *ruminatio* was commonly attended by undertone vocalizations.<sup>7</sup> This has the effect of

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<sup>7</sup> Many contemporary discussions of this matter owe a debt to Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (1982:espec. 15-17, 72-75), a work especially distinguished for its deep sensitivity to the monastic experience. For a highly informative and thoroughly documented study of oral and silent reading in the Middle Ages, see Saenger 1982. Saenger argues that silent reading originated at an earlier date and had a more pervasive influence than common scholarly opinion recognizes, though vocal reading played an important role as well. On the other hand, Zumthor in *La lettre et la voix* (1987) argues in detail for medieval literature's fundamental vocalicity. Undoubtedly we should resist reductive and unitary characterizations of medieval communications, since the situation was a complex one. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the literacy of the general populace lagged behind that of the most erudite, whose views, for the very reason that they were committed to writing, have survived to influence our perceptions of medieval communication today. Plainly some medieval authors, such as Dante, addressed themselves to the literati; yet we cannot assume that other great poets would have disdained

translating sight into sound, text object into auditory event. In the context of such reading habits, the book becomes the source and occasion of multiple performances that are simultaneously seen and spoken; the growing privatization of reading moves through stages of interaction and co-dependency between aural and visual phenomenologies. In another arena of medieval life, as Brian Stock has argued at length, the politics of heresy and the renegotiation of doctrine in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were galvanized by what Stock calls textual communities, centering on charismatic interpreters preaching before what were often illiterate or marginally literate *auditores*.<sup>8</sup> After the foundation of the great medieval universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the agonistic structure of medieval theology, reflecting the orientation towards debate and disputation in the educational system, recalls the live, ad hominem flytings of the heroic and courtly literary genres.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for the denizens of the world that created it, an intellectual dialectic that descends to us today as abstract arguments on a written page came surcharged with the recollection of human faces and human voices. Even to the medieval educated, the grapheme and its vocal enunciations were never far away from each other.

Now these observations are, in theory, easily enough grasped, although detailed study of the intricacies of orality-literacy relations in the Middle Ages has only begun. Yet the challenge that orality poses to modern-day academics goes beyond the mere formulation of new theoretical models. What our current methods of study lack is a programmatic grounding for the scholar-researcher's own, personal imaginative engagement with the oral resonances that bathe the written text. At present, our approach to such cultural resonance is predominantly intertextual: that is, we read out the cultural supplementarity of the target text through the medium of other texts (including the "texts" of archaeology

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a wider audience. And even literate people sometimes prefer the immediacy and seeming sociability of oral media: witness the success of radio and television, whose popularity has not been limited to the uneducated.

<sup>8</sup> Stock 1983:88-240; elsewhere in the volume he shows how growing medieval literacy covertly fueled the eucharistic controversy, the development of language theory, and changing views of ritual.

<sup>9</sup> On the agonistic heritage of the academy, see Ong 1982:espec. 119-48; I discuss heroic flyting in *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative* (1990).

and the visual arts).<sup>10</sup> While the vocabulary by which we authorize such literary exegesis is often quite abstract, in fact most of us bring to these interpretive acts assumed scenes of reading and writing that are very concrete, human, and familiar. For these scenes are derived from our own lives, as when we pull books from the library, open them to parallel passages that we display side by side on our desks, thumb through our sheaf of xeroxes, compile note extracts, and engage in the diverse range of intertextual operations that a scholar's life entails. My point here is that intertextuality can exist only if specific people have intertextual experiences. Now there can be no doubt that the emergence of intertextual perspectives gradually revolutionized medieval intellectual life. Yet the manner and extent to which intertextuality shaped the medieval perception of a given work is bound up with such mundane considerations as the amount of bodily labor entailed in procuring and reviewing multiple manuscripts as a background to that reading and the likelihood that an author could assume readers willing to undertake such work. Print technology has made intertextuality more naturally accessible to us today than it was to our medieval ancestors. Moreover, quite apart from quantitative and qualitative distinctions between our intertextuality and theirs, the current theoretical ascendancy of intertextual models has almost entirely blinded us to interperformativity, by which I mean to designate that dimension of a spoken performance that resides in its relationship with other performances.<sup>11</sup> Interperformativity is not arrayed in visual space like open books on a table but unfolds in the play of memory as the performance is actively, presently going on. When hypertextualized literary scholars only understand orality and have not imaginatively grappled with it, they usually wind up reducing interperformativity to intertextuality, when it is not at all the same thing.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> While these methods are not sufficient to medieval orality, they are essential movements in our approach to the textuality of a society that did, after all, try to ground itself in the authority of scripture. For a major study of texts and signification in medieval visual arts and language theory as well as medieval poetry, see Jesse Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book* (1985).

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of this concept, see Parks 1989.

<sup>12</sup> The distinction between intertextuality and interperformativity is not a metaphysical one waiting to be deconstructed away. To the contrary, it originates in the kinds of concrete, pragmatic differences between written and spoken communication as

Thus modern critics routinely assign to medieval literary texts meanings that an aural audience could not possibly have inferred but whose uncovering demands instead a reader opening out a text through an intertextual frame of reference. Live auditors do not have time or mental leisure to trace consciously through long, sequential, multi-stepped interpretive maneuvers while a performance is going on. Spoken discourse can indeed evoke and resonate against a rich and complex cultural background. The spoken always occurs within the unspoken. Yet since the consciousness of listeners is occupied in the immediate act of auditory construal, the unspoken does not find articulation as conscious thought process but remains an inchoate potential empowering or resisting what is indeed said. The reader, by contrast, has the leisure and intertextual resources to engage in a more fully contrapuntal interaction with a phenomenologically stable text. Because the close reading practices to which our training has acclimated us were in large part developed amid the high textuality of a modern print society, the experience of an oral performance group becomes more distant from us with every onward step of our interpretive advance. Unfortunately, the recognition of this state of affairs seems at first to mandate a kind of *via negativa*, by which the positive content of oral discourse becomes construed as merely the impoverished remainder from a series of subtractions. Yet in actuality this paring away of the accretions of textualist hermeneutics merely brings us to the starting point; it is from here that the sensibilities of an oral culture take over. Yet what these sensibilities would have been and how they would reconfigure what presents itself to us as texts will remain largely opaque until the experience of these texts as performed utterance has registered within our sensibilities.

It is precisely this need that audio-cassette editions, as the featured tool in a broad-based attempt to resurrect the vocality and performativity of medieval literature, would address. Many recordings of medieval poetry already exist, of course; and some of these are highly accomplished, both aesthetically and linguistically. Further, a new interest in such recording

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were discussed above. It is true that oral and written interpretation ultimately approximate each other in many respects, but each must labor painfully to articulate what the other possesses as a part of its immediate phenomenology. On the relation between oral and literate models of interpretation, see Ong 1988.

projects seems to be burgeoning in many quarters.<sup>13</sup> Yet the profession as a whole does not yet take such ventures seriously, and this attitude is what we must change first of all. I repeat—and this is my essential thesis: such tapes should not be regarded as mere imitations of literary works whose primary and inviolable state is forever textual, but as editions and primary sources in their own right. If we recognize that audio editions are not mere frills but essential instruments of inquiry, we will endow their production with the kind of material and intellectual investment that will guarantee both their quality and their impact.

This process will be greatly facilitated if medievalists embark upon it in an organized and collaborative manner. Programs and institutes for medieval studies could follow the lead of the Chaucer Studio in sponsoring such recordings, starting with major works that would be of wide interest and generate good sales. If approached in a credible manner, front-rank scholarly publishers or other businesses catering to a scholarly and library market might want to become involved. For a successful revolution in the medium of scholarly publication would redound to the credit of a publisher imaginative and foresighted enough to embark upon it. At the same time, the name of a respectable press would lend dignity to an enterprise that is bound to raise eyebrows at first. Publishers could also provide skilled marketing. Libraries and other prospective buyers would soon come to expect new listings in a line of audio editions in spring and autumn catalogues; and the simplicity of such cassette productions, from the standpoint of recording engineering, would keep costs down.<sup>14</sup> In short, once the idea wins the endorsement of medievalists in general, there is no reason why the business world should resist its implementation.

The community of medievalists could further assist in upholding standards of quality control. Just as a book manuscript must pass several critical readings, so an oral performance, before it is accepted for recording, should be subjected to a rigorous review process. One part of this process

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<sup>13</sup> For example, an ongoing cassette recording program has been launched by the Chaucer Studio, which advertises itself as “a non-profit-making organization founded in 1986 to produce recordings of medieval English texts [both Old and Middle English] at moderate prices” (*Old English Newsletter*, 22 [1989]: 6). Betsy Bowden’s *Chaucer Aloud* (1987), which deals in detail with the vocal performing of Chaucerian texts, comes with its own cassette; and her discography (1988) reviews 95 recordings of Old and Middle English. The cassette recording of medieval literature may be an idea whose time has come.

<sup>14</sup> The Chaucer Studio, for example, advertises its cassette recordings for \$5.00 each for individual buyers (\$10.00 for institutions).



should involve auditions by a panel of experts working either with live performers or, more practically, with inexpensively recorded submissions. Their evaluations should not neglect such technical points as correct pronunciation and mastery of dialect. Yet an oral rendering inevitably interprets, as any actor knows. How has the performer handled timing, tempo, poetic meter? How expressive are his/her intonational dynamics? Does a musical instrument (such as a harp or lyre) accompany the vocalization? Why so, or why not? What sense of space and audience involvement has the recording engineering created? Specialists in speech communications and musicology could provide valuable assistance in questions such as these. Yet we should not stop here. What scholarly interpretation of the poem does the performer endorse, and how does his or her rendering communicate this? Is the recitation historically sensitized? How does it register those textual sources or oral-formulaic backgrounds that bear on particular passages? Where and how does the singer or reciter ironize? How does he or she handle multiple voicings, whether literal, as in scenes of dialogue, or theoretical, as in utterances expressive of deconstructed, decentered personae or cultural heteroglossia? After all, if our critical insights have validity, we ought to be able to relate them to poems as vocalized events. To clarify the approach taken and to foster vigorous critical discussion, the performer or a cohort should provide a full written introduction to the poem and to his or her rendering of it, along with detailed "textual" notes relating to specific passages; and his material should ultimately be published along with the cassette. Because of the wide range of expertise entailed, perhaps these audio editions with their accompanying apparatus should be created by a team including, minimally, a scholar-critic and a trained performer.

Preferably major, scholarly audio editions would be published as companions to existing standard textual editions. Accordingly, the textual supplement to the audio edition of, say, one of the *Canterbury Tales* would refer, when relevant, to the *Riverside Chaucer*. Yet such authoritative and scholarly recordings of extant texts need not be the only genre of audio edition. The pedagogically minded, for example, might develop a dual-language recording of *Beowulf* with interlinear translations for students. The programmatic incorporation of auditory assignments and testing into *Beowulf* classes, alongside the usual work of translating Klaeber's text, might greatly speed up the mastery of Old English while enhancing the student's initial encounters with the poem. On the other hand, critics who wish to feature specialized interpretations of perspectives could tailor recordings to a more extravagant cut. One version might play the same

poem before diverse audiences—courtly, clerical, and popular. Another might reconstitute in the mind of a solitary reader whose ruminations supplement the voice of the text with recollected phrases from other works, vernacular or Latin, snatches from the liturgy or popular song, noises of daily life, and so forth. I know that these suggestions may seem outlandish at present. Yet this appearance of eccentricity is merely an effect of the entrenched textuality of scholarly habit. Once the aural phenomenology of medieval culture has been worked into our scholarly grain, its importance will be all too obvious to us, and we will devise means for its articulation and transmission that cannot be imagined now.

When new audio editions are released, they should be greeted with the same interest and careful scrutiny as is given to a new book. Major journals should run reviews; bibliographies should pick them up; and annotated discographies, such as Betsy Bowden's 1988 review of fully 95 recordings of Old and Middle English literature, should become standard reference tools. A favorable critical reception should carry with it such prestige as could legitimate, for example, an academic promotion or the awarding of grant funding. Conventional research scholars, for their part, could use such audio editions, in conjunction with printed editions, as a basis for their published research. For those scholars who develop their critical schemata through a series of *listenings*, rather than through a series of visual *readings*, will be far better attuned to an oral and vocal hermeneutic sensibility than will their text-bound counterparts. The habit of accessing medieval literature through the ears will enable them to discriminate interpretations a listening audience could derive from a live performance from those which it could not. At the same time, since acculturation in oral aesthetics need not precipitate a relapse into illiteracy, such scholars' ability to study medieval textual traditions would be unimpaired. The Middle Ages were a time of both intense orality and intense literacy. The future medievalist will need to be proficient in both media.

Though cassette performances recuperate the fossilized sonance of textualized discourse, they do not bring it back to the public domain. For most audiophiles today, if they are seriously listening to a recording and not using it as mere background, do so privately, on a car or home system or on a walkman; earphone auditing is already second nature to many of today's adolescents, who will undoubtedly infiltrate the ranks of academia in due course. Such private listenings are most analogous to the private replaying of discourse through the memory or through ruminative reading. Vital though such experiences are, they should be supplemented by live

performances at medievalists' conventions and gatherings, for by such means we can recover a sense of medieval literature as *public event*. I have often noted that, when a conference speaker has the gumption to launch into a dramatic rendering, much of the audience perks up; and while afterwards participants in the session usually treat the episode lightly, since it provided an enjoyable and therefore unscholarly pastime, they remember it better than the standard paper. This spontaneous interest, I admit, is born of the better instincts of medievalists whose intimate familiarity with and love for their subject discourse makes them want to experience it as much of it was originally meant to be. We should restructure our discipline so that this eminently healthy impulse can bloom to the fullest extent. Conferences with significant medieval representation should feature ongoing readings, perhaps with a touch of pageantry, costume, musical accompaniment, perhaps with interlinear translations, particularly for the more difficult dialects. If managed with an intelligent enthusiasm, such sessions might increase the popularity of medieval studies even while sparking new critical insights and lines of research.

The greatest impediment to the program of reoraling medieval literature as I have been describing it here lies not in establishing appropriate theory but in overcoming the lethargy of old habits. And I will be the first to acknowledge that I don't practice what I preach: my own research and pedagogical methods are almost exclusively textual. Yet the potential gains for our discipline are such as to justify whatever steps we as a community can take, even if they must be, at first, baby-steps. But once the momentum has been established, we might find hidden reserves of talent coming to our aid. Indeed, in my observation medievalists' quarters are surprisingly well stocked with closet bards. As Sir Toby Belch said to Sir Andrew Aguecheek, "Wherefore are these things hid? Wherefore have these gifts a curtain before 'em?" Strike up the harp and let the song begin! *Why not?* There is nothing unscholarly about such practice. To the contrary, in an age when the electronic revolution is sweeping past and leaving us in its wake, it would be unscholarly *not* to make use of the tools that technology has thrust into our hands.

Literary scholarship today is still, in most part, clinging to a brink that society at large has already plunged across and found to be a gateway. To continue to take textuality as the measure of all things and possibilities would be to deny the world that is even now being born around us. Richard Lanham (1989) has recently argued that the digital revolution promises to explode our notions of what a text, and therefore what textual study, means. Audio and audio-visual recordings, however, will translate us beyond the

dominion of texts altogether, into a universe where textuality is one of several modalities and where texts are constituted substances, not the unique and constituting primal stuff. Embracing the new media will not only bring us face to face with the future but, ironically enough, will put us into closer touch with the past. It will restore to our awareness *as practicing scholars* that experience of the spoken word, unmediated by texts, that is the common inheritance of all people.

*Louisiana State University*

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