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J. M. FOLEY

**ORAL POETRY.** Oral poetry encompasses two general types of verse: oral traditional poetry and oral textual poetry. Oral traditional poetry includes songs that are, for the most part, both orally composed and orally performed. They are primarily ritual, lyric, and narrative poems. By contrast, oral textual poetry is often written down but presented orally in \*performance. It includes popular songs as well as more contemporary genres such as spoken-word poetry. Oral performance is a fundamental, defining characteristic of both oral traditional and oral textual poetry.

Oral poetry functions in many different ritual and social contexts and assumes a wide variety of forms. The meaning of *oral poetry* is complicated by the fact that oral poetry is rarely, if ever, entirely oral because of the inevitable intersections between oral and written culture. Questions regarding the parameters and nature of oral poetry have engendered much scholarly debate. The dynamics of oral composition and performance are addressed by the major theoretical approaches in the field (\*oral-formulaic theory, performance studies, and \*ethnopoetics).

In preliterate societies, all poetry is unambiguously oral traditional—composed and transmitted in performance by people who do not read or write. In literate or partially literate societies, however, the situation is far more complicated since orality and literacy naturally interact, resulting in overlapping forms of oral and written poetry. It follows that rigid categories of oral and literary verse and the insistence on an explicit divide between them are untenable.

Ritual, lyric, and narrative song are the principal categories of oral traditional poetry. *Ritual verse* is rooted in an ancient past; indeed, all poetry begins with oral poetry, the origins of which are found in the rhythms, sound patterns, and repetitive structures that reinforce and empower the words and actions of ritual. Ritual poems are short, nonnarrative songs that include \*lullabies, ritual wedding songs, \*laments, praise poems (see EPIDELICTIC POETRY), songs for special festivals and ceremonies, and \*incantations. Most ritual poetry is performed at either life- or calendrical-cycle celebrations.

Life-cycle ritual poetry marks primarily birth, marriage, and death. Associated with birth, lullabies are short songs with repetitive verses and sounds (often nonsense syllables) and are sung to lull babies to sleep. Wedding songs are among the richest ritual genres and commemorate the most celebrated life-cycle passage in traditional society, marriage. Many wedding songs

articulate the bride's emotional and often painful separation from her childhood and incorporation into adult status as a wife, esp. in patrilocal societies; some are termed wedding laments. Death lament—poetry that is often chanted or declaimed—is the genre of death rites, frequently performed by women. It typically includes direct discourse to the deceased by the mourner(s) as well as imagined dialogues between them.

While death laments performed by mourners eulogize the deceased, praise poems or \*panegyric odes composed by praise singers declaim and glorify the living, typically elite members of society. At one time attested throughout the world, this genre now figures most conspicuously in Africa and Oceania.

Songs for calendrical festivals and ceremonies are performed at key times in the year, both secular and religious. In agricultural societies, these oral poetic forms are frequently associated with the solstices. Songs at these junctures are often stanzaic and sung in groups, e.g., \*carols, performed at Christmas and New Year's. Seasonal songs sometimes express religious messages. More often they convey wishes for fertility, good health, and fortune and express the eternal hope of new beginnings (the new year, springtime); they also accompany rituals of divination.

Incantations are verbal charms that are sung as part of magic rituals. Most common are healing charms, curses, spells, and exorcisms. Sound patterns (\*alliteration, \*assonance, and repetition of certain syllables, words, and word combinations) are conspicuous in incantations since it is often believed that the "exact" repetition of specific sounds and words is necessary to effect the desired magic.

*Oral lyric poems* are short, informal, nonnarrative songs and are universal. They are melodic and often stanzaic. \*Lyric poetry covers a great variety of topics, the most common being love and longing; many are also about suffering. Dancing and drinking songs, as well as work, war, or political songs, among many others, also figure in lyric poetry. These forms are usually ephemeral. Words and ideas are perpetually repeated and paraphrased in oral lyric since songs typically dwell on single ideas and the emotional responses that they engender.

The two principal genres of oral traditional \*narrative poetry are \*epic and \*ballad. Oral epic poems are songs of considerable length and complexity that recount deeds of significance—both heroic and mythic—to the community or nation. The epic tells a story from beginning to end, often with a fullness of detail. As a result, epic performances sometimes last for many hours, even days. Epic poetry is usually stichic (see ΣΤΙΧΟΣ); the same metric line—with some variation—is repeated in a linear fashion. The melodies of epic poetry are typically repetitive; verses, however, are sometimes chanted instead of sung. Sometimes epic is a combination of poetry and prose, e.g., the Congolese *Mwindo* epic, West African *Sunjata*, and Turkic *Book of Dede Korkut*. While some epics such as the *Iliad* or the *Chanson de Roland* have tragic overtones, oral epic is by and large optimistic. The hero generally triumphs gloriously

over the enemy (as in Rus., Armenian, South Slavic, or Af. trads.). Oral epic has circulated since antiquity. The genre in the pre-20th-c. world is known to posterity because the poetry was written down, presumably when it was still being performed. Orally composed and performed but surviving only in textual form are epics such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, the Persian *Shāhnāma*, *Beowulf*, OF \**chansons de geste*, the *Kalevala*, and numerous others. Termed “oral-derived” poetry, many of these epics were perpetuated both orally and in textual transcriptions, exemplifying how oral and literary forms mingle and overlap over time. Some epics have continued to be performed up to the present day or at least until the late 20th c. (the Kyrgyz *Manas*; South Asian, Ar., and Romanian epics).

Ballads are relatively short, narrative, nonheroic poems that focus on single episodes—usually sensational domestic dramas. Although there are comic ballads, the genre as a whole has an elegiac tone. The tempo of narration is more leisurely than in epic; some ballads consist entirely of dialogue. Ballads are generally stanzaic and their musical forms lyric. Eng. and west Eur. ballads as a genre date from at least the 13th c. and flourished until relatively recently. Anglo-Am. ballads are among the best known (e.g., “Lord Lovel,” “Barbara Allen,” “Fair Margaret and Sweet William”). Many ballads are also oral-derived.

*Oral textual poetry* refers to oral poems that are composed in writing but performed orally. Many are popular songs that first circulate as written texts and subsequently enter oral trad. Typical of this category are Eng. \*broadside or street ballads, which were sold in printed form to the public and then spread orally. \*Blues, contemp. popular, and “folk” songs fit here as well. Some songs travel back and forth between printed and oral forms, illustrating again the complex interplay between oral and written poetry.

Oral textual poetry also refers to a widespread contemp. urban genre termed *spoken-word poetry*. Spoken-word poems are original compositions written by poets who perform them orally at \*poetry slams. The poems are typically nonmetrical and are accompanied by gestures and dramatic vocal and facial expressions. They convey personal and social concerns such as poverty, injustice, racism, and sexism; the genre is heavy with pain and biting social commentary. Although \*poetic contests have been staged since antiquity, poetry slams date from the mid-1980s in the United States. They have since spread throughout the world.

Performers of oral poetry learn their repertoires from other performers or printed texts. “Learning” poetry can be a process of explicit (intentional) or implicit (internalized or passive) imitation. The former is typical of longer and more complex genres (such as epic), while the latter usually occurs in genres that are shorter and more frequently performed (ritual, lyric, and popular songs).

The most distinctive characteristic of oral poetry is its variability and fluidity of form, in words and, when singing is involved, music. Multiple performances of

the “same song” are invariably different, even in oral textual poetry. There is more variation in different performances of lengthier poems and conversely sometimes verbatim reiteration in shorter poetic forms. Perhaps the most significant mechanism of orality is repetition—from sounds and words to verses, passages, and, in epic and ballad, narrative patterns. The use of \*parallelism in sound, syntax, and rhythm aids oral poets in moving from one verse to another. Thus, lines and clusters of lines are formed and held together by sound, structure, and association of meaning. Oral poetry is characteristically paratactic: verses are “added” to what precedes them. Other rhetorical devices of repetition include \*anaphora, epistrophe, \*anadiplosis, and \*ring composition. Figures of speech such as \*similes and \*metaphors are also part of the compositional stylistics of oral poetry. On the level of content, *multiform* refers to the existence of narrative ideas in multiple forms and is key to understanding the structure of oral poetry.

Several major approaches guided the research on oral poetry in the 20th c. In the 1930s, both Parry and Lord explored compositional style in oral epic in the former Yugoslavia in order to shed light on the art of oral epic verse-making in Homer. Formally presented in the 1960 publication of Lord’s *Singer of Tales*, their findings became known as the oral-formulaic theory. Lord argued that, in preliterate cultures, oral-epic poets learn a special technique of composition by “formula” and “theme.” The formula is “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” The most commonly sung phrases, lines, or \*couplets—those that a singer hears most frequently when learning—establish the patterns for the poetry, its syntactic, rhythmic, metric, and acoustic molds and configurations. In time, the poet can form new phrases or create formulas by analogy and become proficient in thinking in these traditional patterns, the special lang. of oral epic. A theme is a repeated passage that functions in much the same way; it has a more or less stable core of lines or parts of lines, surrounded by various elements adapting it to its context. The oral-formulaic theory has been employed in countless investigations of composition in oral poetry and has dominated the field and profoundly influenced the study and understanding of oral epic for over 50 years.

The most significant devel. in the field of oral poetry since the oral-formulaic theory is performance studies, an appreciation and detailed investigation of oral verbal art in the context of performance. In response, in part, to what was viewed by some as an overly narrow understanding of oral poetry by Lord, Finnegan and others in the 1970s and 1980s began to advocate a broader understanding of the “oral” in oral poetry, an increased appreciation of the significant intersection between oral and literary poetry, and a greater recognition of the critical role of performance. Key in developing the theoretical framework for performance studies, Bauman (1977, 1986) argued that performance is critical to an understanding of oral poetry (and folklore

in general). He and others suggested that oral traditions be viewed as communicative events that involve both verbal artist(s) and audience as participants. Moreover, they proposed that performance stylistics be recognized as verbal and nonverbal alike.

Related to performance studies, ethnopoetics was first formulated in the 1980s and 1990s by Hymes and by Tedlock, who recommended that transcriptions of oral verbal art reflect the dynamics of performance through detailed prompts in the text. In this way, readers can “reperform” oral texts as they experience them. Foley (1991) also brought depth to comparative textual readings of oral poetry (esp. epic) by seeking to appreciate the idiomatic language of oral verse and its traditional register.

Other recent developments in the study of oral poetry include an increasing globalization of the field as primary source materials expand and research encompasses broader areas of inquiry. The Internet, information-filled Web sites, and other media technologies are also progressively employed to provide ever more detailed “performances” and thus fuller and more nuanced understandings of the mechanics and meanings of oral poetry.

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