

# The Tradition of Oral Narrative Literature: The Middle English Romance *Sir Orfeo* (1) —With Reference to Traditional Elements in Homeric Poems—

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The present paper traces the history of oral narrative literature and refers to how the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* was composed under the influence of preceding oral narratives. Although narratives including Middle English romances used to be performed in speech, *Sir Orfeo* and other romances remain in the form of a manuscript.

In the long history of oral literature, expressions regularly used by oral poets, or “singers,” later defined and classified by Milman Parry as “formulas,” “systems,” and “themes,” were refined and polished. Using these expressions, singers called minstrels in the Middle Ages recited romances, which reflected people’s thoughts during that time. Oral poetry is a traditional art that has been created through countless people’s knowledge and effort. This paper focuses only on Homer’s epic poetry, myths, and medieval literature, specifically romances, which are examined here as narratives, based on which *Sir Orfeo* will be closely studied in the next paper.

KEYWORDS: *Sir Orfeo*, the Middle English romances, myths, oral narratives, formula, system, theme

## 1. Introduction to *Sir Orfeo*

*Sir Orfeo* was composed from the mid-14th century to the beginning of the 15th century. The following manuscripts are the only three extant manuscripts of *Sir Orfeo*: the Auchinleck MS., MS. Harley 3810, and MS. Ashmole 61. A first remarkable study appeared as the work titled *Sir Orfeo*, edited by Oscar Zielke in 1880.<sup>1)</sup> Among these extant manuscripts, Zielke chose the one considered to be the most authentic: the Auchinleck MS. In 1954, Alan J. Bliss edited *Sir Orfeo*, including the readable texts of all three versions of the poem.<sup>2)</sup> According to Bliss, the Auchinleck MS. is closest to the original, with reasonable accuracy; that is, it is considered the most authentic of the three.

The Auchinleck MS. in the National Library of Scotland, dating from the 1330s to the 1340s, contains the earliest Middle English version of *Sir Orfeo*. Of the six different scribes of the manuscript, from Scribe 1 to Scribe 6, *Sir Orfeo* was written by Scribe 1.<sup>3)</sup> The poem is composed in octosyllabic couplets in the City-Essex dialect and the Westminster-Middlesex dialect.<sup>4)</sup> The manuscript is speculated to have been produced in London and possibly read by Geoffrey Chaucer, which signifies the manuscript’s importance in those days.<sup>5)</sup> MS. Harley 3810 and MS. Ashmole 61 are related to each other through a common ancestor, which the Auchinleck MS. does not share.<sup>6)</sup> MS. Harley 3810 and MS. Ashmole 61 were penned in the 15th century and were more abridged

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than the Auchinleck MS.<sup>7)</sup>

Editions by Kenneth Sisam,<sup>8)</sup> Walter H. French and Charles B. Hale,<sup>9)</sup> and others were later published. Of the three manuscripts, most *Sir Orfeo* editors consider the Auchinleck MS. as their main source text. This paper adopts *Sir Orfeo* in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, edited by French and Hale, as its main reference because the editors' notes provide more comprehensive details about the narrative than Bliss's notes. In addition, the edition by Bliss is also referred to in parallel to understand the text in greater detail and accuracy, as his research supports the complete understanding of *Sir Orfeo*.

In the Auchinleck MS., lines 1 through 24 and 33 through 46 are missing, so these lines are incorporated from MS. Harley 3810. Therefore, *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck MS. consists of a total of 604 lines including the supplement from MS. Harley 3810. While the Auchinleck MS. edited by Bliss or by Sisam has 604 lines, French and Hale's edition has 602. French and Hale edited the text based on Zielke's edition, where Zielke had excluded the two lines after line 48 despite their presence in the manuscript.

## 2. Romances and Myths as Narrative Literature

The extant manuscripts and editions allow us modern readers to recognize the existence of the romances that entertained people around five hundred years ago. From a historical standpoint, all stories were told in speech. Romances were originally stories "sung" by poets. *Sir Orfeo* was also enjoyed by being listened to rather than read in silence as we do in modern times.

The romance *Sir Orfeo* did not emerge suddenly around the middle of the 14th century, when it was left in the manuscripts. *Sir Orfeo* is considered to be rooted in Greek mythology, specifically the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Needless to say, the myth had also been relayed among people in those days.

It is necessary to clarify the features of romances and myths to explore the nature of the stories. Dictionaries contain definitions of "romance" and "myth" as genres of literature. Here is the definition of "romance" in the *OED*:

A fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life.<sup>10)</sup>

This shows that "romance," as "a fictitious narrative," emerges from the viewpoint that events in stories were in some sense thought to be contrary to facts. Etymologically, the term "romance" is derived from the adverb "romanice" in Vulgar Latin, which means "in the Roman manner" and also implies "in a Roman language."<sup>11)</sup>

On the other hand, "myth" is defined as

[a] purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.

The *OED* defines "myth" and "romance" as "a fictitious narrative." Therefore, myths are considered to include stories that are, to an extent, contrary to facts while simultaneously expressing some aspects of truth. Although "myth" seems to possibly designate innumerable fictitious narratives, the

*OED*'s definition suggests some special features of myths: the presence of "supernatural persons" or "gods and goddesses" and the descriptions of "natural phenomena" that are personified and behave as humans. "Myth" was originally translated from the ancient Greek "mythos," meaning "speech" or "word," but it later came to denote "divine nature," which is currently one of its most popular meanings.

As already mentioned, one of *Sir Orfeo*'s predecessors was the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Greek mythology is one body of extant myths, all of which have been handed down from the ancient Greeks. The gods of Greek myth have their basis in the history of the Greek nation. Shortly after BC 2000, "the Greeks" are assumed to have migrated from the north to the Greek Peninsula, where they mixed with other tribes. Accordingly, the oldest parts of Greek myths are considered to have emerged during that period. The Greeks created myths as they grew as a nation, reaching their prime in the Mycenaean civilization and eventually dissolving. In other words, in that period, the Middle Ages for the Greeks, Greek myths were developed and formed. Ancient Greek literature, including a system of Olympian gods, began with Homer and Hesiod followed by writers such as Pindar and Ovid, who narrated myths and legends.<sup>12)</sup>

"Myth" covers an extremely wide range of ideas, and it is also still vague. The term has been given conflicting and complicated definitions because various overlapping concepts must be considered. One of its characteristics is that it is connected to traditional cultural beliefs and ritual practices among local people. Claudia D. Johnson and Vernon Johnson state, "Cultures turn to myth, for example, to explain the creation of the world, the existence of evil, and natural phenomena for which they have no scientific explanation."<sup>13)</sup> Myths reflect the culture and the society that generated them, and their nature depends on how each ethnic group or tribe has led their everyday lives and what beliefs and institutions have been socially passed on.

Thus far, attention has been paid to the "fictitious" in "fictitious narrative," which can both be used to explain "myth" and "romance." As for the term "narrative," the *OED* provides its etymological information in the entry of its verbal form "narrate." It is derived from the Latin "*narrāre*," the infinitive of "*narro*," which means "to relate or recount." According to the *OED*, "relate" derives from "*referre*," which consists of the prefix "*re-*" and "*ferre*," meaning "to bear, carry." "Recount" originates from "*reconter*," which is made up of "*re-*" attached to "*conter*," meaning "to count." Notably, both "relate" and "recount" include the prefix "*re-*," meaning "again." Considering the origins and the meanings of "relate" and "recount," "narrative," a noun form of "narrate," can be thought to be defined as the process or act of handing down a series of events that have happened through generations by referring to and telling them repeatedly.

"To narrate" is closely related to "*gnārāre*" or "*gnārus*," meaning "to know." This indicates that, as narratives are repeatedly told and recited, they penetrate people's minds and memories and are thus accepted by people, allowing them to know the true meanings of the narratives.

The origin of the word "narrative" means repeatedly explaining or recounting the history or the process in which a series of significant events for each group or tribe have occurred. Hence, narratives are originally stories that have been handed down as particularly significant or historical from one generation to another.

Narratives are told in words, and the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* is a fictitious narrative, left in some manuscripts between the period of myth and in the 16th and 17th centuries when romances were assigned the above definition.

### 3. Homeric Poems: The Discovery of the Notions “Formulas,” “Systems,” and “Themes” as Evidence of Orality

In *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg explain, “To understand the present we must possess the past.” They emphasize the importance of Greek and Roman literature in the study of oral literature, referring to Homer as “the culmination of oral narrative art” in the Western literary tradition. They also write, “As oral narrative, the Homeric poems are a powerful amalgam of various materials—religious, historical, social—shaped by a strong impulse toward artistic unity in narrative.”<sup>14)</sup> In other words, the artistic unity among various topics is sought to be achieved in old narrative poems by poets such as Homer, who, along with other oral poets, is considered to have striven to make his works artistically accomplished. At the same time, his works are quite entertaining and intellectually appealing, that is, easier to be accepted by a wide variety of people in those days.

In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert B. Lord labels Homer “our oral epic poet” as well as “our singer of tales.” He also describes him as simultaneously a performer, a composer, and a poet, as defined below:

Our oral poet is composer. Our singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer, and poet are one under different aspects *but at the same time*. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act.<sup>15)</sup>

The oral poets, including Homer, are described in *The Singer of Tales* as those who compose their poems by simultaneously singing and performing them. Oral poets consider singing their poems as tantamount to composing them.

Scholes and Kellogg also call the oral poet “a singer,” using the verb “improvise” to describe how an oral poet sings his epic poems.<sup>16)</sup> In fact, singing poetry impromptu is a characteristic of the oral “singer.” Lord explains the difference between a literary poem and an oral poem:

In the case of a literary poem, there is a gap in time between composition and reading or performance; in the case of the oral poem this gap does not exist, because composition and performance are two aspects of the same moment.<sup>17)</sup>

The oral poem is shared by the reciter and the audience—in other words, by those who happen to be there when it was presented. Regarding this point, Scholes and Kellogg explain the existence of oral poetry as follows:

Until he [the singer] actually sings a narrative, that song does not exist, except as a potential song among infinitely many others in the abstract apparatus of the singer’s tradition. Conversely, when the song is over it has ceased to exist.<sup>18)</sup>

Written poetry is expected to exist beyond time and place, but its readers cannot share the inspired,

magical moment of its composition. In contrast, the audience does share the moment of oral poetry composition with the poet or the “singer” when it is first sung right in front of them; thus, it exists nowhere but where it is performed.

Scholars Milman Parry and Lord studied oral poetry, and after Parry’s death, Lord continued his colleague’s research. Parry clarified that expressions in Homer’s poems are based on fixed forms, that is, “formulas.”<sup>19)</sup> Oral poetry has some obvious features that, within the poem itself, indicate its origin in an oral narrative tradition. In studying Homer’s epic poetry, Parry defines “formula,” recognizing it as one of the features of Homer’s epic style, as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.”<sup>20)</sup>

Another Homeric feature noted by Parry is “system,” defined as “a group of phrases which have the same metrical value and which are enough alike in thought and words to leave no doubt that the poet who used them knew them not only as single formulas, but also as formulas of a certain type.”<sup>21)</sup> “Theme” is also identified as another feature of orally composed narrative poetry. Lord defines “theme” as “the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song.”<sup>22)</sup> According to Scholes and Kellogg, Parry and Lord discovered traditional “themes” common in the South Slavic and Greek “oral” epic. They also observed that Anglo-Saxon, Old Icelandic, Old French, and Finnish oral poetry possessed similar kinds of “themes.”<sup>23)</sup>

Parry’s discovery of “formula” is most crucial in oral poetry analysis. Lord recalls former expressions “of the ‘repetitions’ in Homer, of the ‘stock epithets,’ of the ‘epic clichés’ and ‘stereotyped phrases.’” He believes that “[s]uch terms were either too vague or too restricted.” Lord regards Parry’s “formula” as “the culmination” of the need for precision.<sup>24)</sup> Concerning “formula,” Joseph A. Russo also writes,

The hallmark of oral style, from the beginning, has been its high formular density. This high density is needed to facilitate the poet’s recomposition of the poem each time he performs it. Instead of memorizing a fixed text, what he keeps in mind is a narrative sequence of themes and incidents, an overall plot. As he performs the tale, he does not have to think about exact word-choice because the words for each idea come already grouped in phrase-clusters, the clusters serving as prefabricated sections of verse, available in various correct rhythmic units that can be smoothly linked together to yield an easy dactylic hexameter movement.<sup>25)</sup>

Because of “formulas,” extremely long poetry could be recited. These “formulas” also make it possible, or easier, for oral poets, including Homer, to compose their poems spontaneously. Moreover, the very existence of “formulas” in a poem indicates that it is an oral composition. Scholes and Kellogg argue as follows:

[N]ot until Parry discovered that the whole Homeric corpus, about 27,000 hexameter lines, was entirely formulaic did critics realize that what had all along appeared to be superficial stylistic feature was in fact inescapable evidence that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were orally composed.<sup>26)</sup>

As mentioned previously, “narrate” is close in meaning to “relate” or “recount,” each of which includes the prefix “re-,” indicating repetition. The prefix might imply that not only were oral poems “repeatedly” sung and handed down through many oral poets, but many “repetitions” also

occur in the poems themselves.

Although oral poets repeat existing conventional expressions, they do not necessarily sing an expression exactly as they learned it. Neither were the handed-down formulas always used as is. Lord states,

The singer never stops in the process of accumulating and recombining, and remodeling formulas and themes, thus perfecting his singing and enriching his art. He proceeds in two directions: he moves toward refining what he already knows and toward learning new songs.<sup>27)</sup>

In other words, for Scholes and Kellogg, “[t]he individual singers in a tradition of oral poetic narrative are as important as the individual poets in a tradition of written narrative, but the role of the singer is vastly different from that of the poet.”<sup>28)</sup> The oral poet can be argued to be simply the same as today’s literary poet, aside from their roles, in the sense that both “created poetry.”

When oral poets were singing poems without reading letters, they recomposed and sang as their own the poems they heard and learned after they kept them in mind for a long time. An oral poet may sing the same poem, but it did not always come to him in its exact form. For the oral poet, “[e]ach performance is a separate act of creation.”<sup>29)</sup> Each time an oral poet performed, he created his own poem just like how literary poets today write theirs. While written materials remain as they are, oral poems changed with each performance. They were like living things that continue to grow and evolve.

In a society where it was not so common to use letters, singing a poem played an important role.<sup>30)</sup> Unlike written poetry, oral poetry depends on people’s retentive memories. Oral poems were transmitted or handed down by voices from memory, and oral poetry is generally a product of memory. In a passage in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates speaks about the relation between letters and memory. To wit, in the Naukratis region of Egypt lived one of the country’s old gods named Theut, who first created arithmetic, calculation, geometry, and astronomy, as well as draughts, dice, and other such games. Theut wanted to spread them widely among people and came to King Thamos, who ruled Egypt at that time. While Thamos offered many opinions about each art, he said the following regarding letters:

O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.<sup>31)</sup>

Through Socrates, Plato says that Thamos, king of all Egypt, does not think using letters provides

any benefit. According to the passage above, reminiscence triggered by external written characters does not happen through the use of one's memory. On the contrary, true wisdom is expressed as something that is gained within, and having true wisdom means becoming truly learned by using one's memory. The marks engraved within human beings are "memories," and wisdom with reality can be considered to represent a clear perception and deep understanding of things. True wisdom always exists within everyone and works its way from inside to outside. If things are brought to remembrance by what exists outside, it means that one only has superficial knowledge, which is not true wisdom.

This way, Thamos expresses his view regarding the "training of memory," which is essential to oral poets to sing poems. In *Phaedrus*, Plato, through Socrates, explains the "training of memory." There is reason to believe that a training process enables oral poets to sing poems. Lord divides the process of becoming an oral poet into three stages, saying, "[F]irst, the period of listening and absorbing; then, the period of application; and finally, that of singing before a critical audience."<sup>32)</sup> Acquisition of true wisdom, which Socrates mentions, is not rendered possible in the first stage only by listening and absorbing. To acquire true wisdom, one must undergo a period of application, that is, be able to use and apply. Learning in the second stage is also expressed as "a process of imitation."<sup>33)</sup> In the third stage, oral poets can recall their memories anytime they like. They sing aloud before an audience and share with them the music and words they all enjoy. Thus, it is demonstrated that oral poets have finally acquired true wisdom.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong considers how people in oral cultures manage to recall an entire story of several hundred words. In concluding this consideration, he writes, "The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts." A section titled "You know what you can recall: mnemonics and formulas" in the third chapter of *Orality and Literacy* explained concrete measures to think about things in a way that they can be readily recalled and easily articulated:

. . . in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper,' and so on)<sup>34)</sup>

These attributes mentioned by Ong are the very characteristics of oral poetry. Wisdom with the reality of memory can be made available through mnemonics and formulas. The oral poet memorizes and recalls each poem by creating the best from the devices described above.

#### 4. Interim Summary

Thus far, this paper has argued that oral narratives are those sung by poets and that elements analyzed as "formula," "system," and "theme" are employed in poems composed by Homer. Among the three elements, "formula" is the basic unit that constitutes oral narratives and that enabled oral singers to recite long narrative poems without reading letters. The frequent occurrence of "formula" should make narratives easier for oral poets to learn even though they listened to them only several times. Overall, "formulas" in narrative poems served to remind oral singers easily and vividly of information or events that they not only learned but also engraved on their minds as memory, or true wisdom.

Oral singers' memory of long narrative poems follows when they fully understand them. Thus,

their ability to recite a long narrative poem is considered proof that they had acquired considerable knowledge of narratives. Conversely, what was not well understood or deeply sympathized in poems by oral singers and their audience would have been forgotten and no longer left in them. This would disappear from the stories and could not be passed on to the next generations. Also notable is that oral poets passed each poem to later generations by recomposing and singing it as their own. Oral narratives are such a great art that involves all the people who digested and inherited them and bears a mixture of their wisdom and knowledge.

A recital by a minstrel, who was an oral singer in the Middle Ages, in the presence of an audience was the basic style of performing romances. Minstrels learned and deeply understood many past expressions that can be referred to as “formulas.” Furthermore, their better understanding of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice allowed them to develop it in accordance with audience preference. They then attempted to refine it even further to the new poetry of *Sir Orfeo*.

This paper argued that one of the greatest ancestors of oral narrative composers was Homer. In the history of English literature, the oral narrative tradition was succeeded to by ethnic epics such as *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland*. In the next paper, the two epics will be discussed, from which Middle English romances gradually emerged.

#### Notes

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- 2) Alan J. Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo* (1954; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- 3) Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, x.
- 4) Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, xvii.
- 5) Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, x.
- 6) Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, xv.
- 7) Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, xi–xii.
- 8) Kenneth Sisam, ed., *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (1921; repr., Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 13–31.
- 9) Walter H. French and Charles B. Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romances*. 2 vols bound as one (1930; repr., New York: Russell and Russel, 1964).
- 10) James A.H. Murray, Henry Bradley, William A. Craigie, and Charles T. Onions, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). All quotations from the *OED* are based on this version.
- 11) According to the *OED*, “romance” is defined as follows: “The vernacular language of France, as opposed to Latin. In later use also extended to related forms of speech, as Provençal and Spanish, and now commonly used as a generic or collective name for the whole group of languages descended from Latin.”
- 12) Shigeichi Kure, *Girishia Shinwa*. (1994; repr., Tokyo: Shinchosya, 1995). A summary of 4–9.
- 13) Claudia D. Johnson and Vernon Johnson, *Understanding the Odyssey: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 15.
- 14) Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 57.
- 15) Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (1960; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 13.
- 16) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 21.



- 17) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 13.
- 18) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 22.
- 19) For details on his analyses of Homer's poems, see Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930): 73–148; see also Milman Parry, Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse Making. II. The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 43 (1932): 1–50.
- 20) Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," 80.
- 21) Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," 85.
- 22) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 68.
- 23) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 26.
- 24) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 30
- 25) Joseph A. Russo. "Oral Style as Performance Style in Homer's *Odyssey*: Should We Read Homer Differently after Parry?" *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*. John Miles Foley, ed., (Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1985.) 549.
- 26) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 20.
- 27) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 26.
- 28) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 21.
- 29) Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 22.
- 30) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 20.
- 31) Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Oia Press 2015). <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html> (accessed June 13, 2019).
- 32) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 21.
- 33) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 23.
- 34) Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 34.

【受理年月日】2019年9月13日