

FOLEY, JOHN MILES. *The Theory of Oral Composition. History and Methodology*. Folkloristics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. xv+170 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper US\$9.95; ISBN 0-253-20465-8. Hardcover US\$35.00; ISBN 0-253-34260-0.

To its already impressive list of publications in the field of folklore studies, the Indiana University Press adds yet another title, and an important one at that. John Miles Foley, noted authority in oral folkloristics and editor of *Oral Tradition*, a journal he inaugurated in 1986 as a "clearinghouse for information on oral traditions all over the world" (109), has put together here a brief and readable story of how and why orality became the important field of scholarly research it is today.

The book falls into two distinct parts. In the first three chapters Foley concentrates on the emergence of contemporary oral theory by stitching *petit point* its origins in the "Homeric question" of the composition and authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, its anchoring in the innovative oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry, and its ramification through the field work of Albert Lord. In the final two chapters the author wields his knowledge *gros point* to review developments of the theory in the wider scholarly community of folklorists and offers methodological guidelines for the work from here on in. A lengthy bibliography, twice as long as the notes, is appended at the end. Although the listing represents no more than a fraction of the material Foley put together in his comprehensive 1985 bibliography, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research*, it is noticeably out of step with the rest of the book—too short for the specialist, too long for the general student.

Disavowing himself of the role of advocate for the Oral Theory in this book, Foley cannot really hide his own affections, which is really quite as it should be. (Again and again we are reminded that the theory has been applied to "more than one hundred separate language areas.") Foley's eye for the fine distinction and the telltale exception that topples the general rule is in evidence throughout. In this regard, the considerable attention to the creative eclecticism of Walter Ong is a pleasant surprise.

If there is any omission to note, it is the lack of biographical information on Parry and Lord. A page or two to give the general reader some idea of the personalities of these seminal thinkers, how Parry met his untimely death, and so forth, would have been useful. And one minor point: the allusion to the Japanese *heike* tales (127, n. 105) should probably be reworded.

The reader anxious to hear the author's final judgment on the future prospects of oral-formulaic theory can open to the final three pages where they are laid out clear and succinct enough. And no doubt there will be many who will do just that. The problem is that such readers are likely to miss the irony of their gesture. For it is precisely that kind of reading, impatient with due process, raring to draw the bottom line to the accounts and get on with it, that Foley has turned his skills against. In this regard, *The Theory of Oral Composition* is in every way a model of secondary scholarship. In presenting a critical account of the primary scholarly sources, the author imposes on himself the same high standards he exacts of those under scrutiny. The transparent structure of the book with its concise and vigilant style, its careful selection of citations and ample documentation, give the final conclusions—otherwise not terribly stunning—an authority of the highest order. There is good tonic in these pages for the serious student of oral tradition, and homework enough to fill a lifetime. It is also, or so it was for me, an enjoyable evening with a remarkable book.

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FOLEY, JOHN MILES, editor. *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1987. 597 pages. Hardcover US\$29.95. ISBN 0-89357-173-3.

As every folklorist knows, the co-founders of the modern study of oral poetry are the classicist Milman Parry and his student, the slavacist Albert Lord. Lord has had his festschrift: *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. John Miles Foley (1981). The prolific editor of that work has also given us the standard bibliography—*Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (1984)—as well as a welcome history—*The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (1988)—of the Parry-Lord theory and its influence. Now Foley has produced a memorial festschrift for Parry, who died in 1935.

The work starts off with a preface by Albert Lord, a pleasantly anecdotal reflection on Parry's life and influence. It is followed by the editor's somewhat confusing introduction. According to Foley, "Parry's activity in the field . . . initiated the comparative method in oral literature research" (18). Foley goes on to say that "Africa, with its plethora of tongues and traditions, is beginning to yield startling new information about oral tradition and culture, while some of the most ancient civilization of the world, among them the Indic, Sumerian, and Hittite, also show signs of oral transmission of tales," and he concludes these thoughts with the assertion that "[t]his enormous field of research and scholarship, still in its relative infancy, is ultimately the bequest of Milman Parry" (19). But this claim vastly overstates the influence of Parry. The comparative method in oral-narrative research was already well established before Parry wrote (see, for example, *The Comparative Method in Folklore*, ed. Linda Dégh, a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* 23, Nos. 2/3 [1986]); indeed, it goes at least as far back as the mythologist Bernard Fontenelle in the early eighteenth century. Nor can Parry be credited with the discovery of oral tradition either in modern Africa or in the ancient world. Foley seems to conceive of the entire field of folk-narrative research as being the child of Parry. It was not: Parry made contributions of astonishing brilliance to the understanding of oral poetry and therefore of oral literature, but he did not father the entire field.

Naturally, the assembly of essays in the collection reflects Foley's conception of Parry. Although many of the essays deal with oral poetry and most draw in one or another important way on the work of Parry or Lord, others are simply essays on one or another folkloric topic, such as Daniel Biebuyk's interesting "Names in Nyanga Society and in Nyanga Tales" and Ruth Webber's "Ballad Openings in the European Ballad."

And yet, ironically, there is also some truth in Foley's making Parry a founding father of folk-narrative research. As several essays in the collection show, literary scholars who are otherwise unacquainted with folkloric research do borrow concepts from the Parry-Lord theory of oral poetry and adapt them for use in the investigation of oral and literary narratives of any kind whatsoever. In short, Parry and Lord are used by non-folklorists to reinvent folkloristics.

Foley's collection consists of twenty-four articles on Greek, South Slavic, Old