

CORRESPONDENCE

ON JASON'S REVIEW OF J. M. FOLEY: *ORAL-FORMULAIC RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP*

Dear Sir:

I am writing in relation to Professor Heda Jason's recent review of my book, *Oral-Formulaic Research and Scholarship: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*, which appeared in your journal in 1985 (vol. XLIV: 296-298). Since this review contains some major errors of fact, I feel it is only fair to ask you to set the record straight by printing some version of the comments I shall set forth below.

Please be advised that I do not make this request lightly. Negative reviews are a fact of scholarly life, and are often productive of new thinking. But Jason has in this instance absolutely misrepresented the case, and I assume that your journal would not want to go on record as tacitly endorsing such mistakes.

Let me also say that I have no quarrel with her *opinions* about the book, nor do I have any right to object to them in this forum. I am concerned only with her curious twisting of things as basic as the title and the introduction, and shall confine my remarks to these areas alone.

1. *Coverage.* The volume is criticized for not having taken all of "oral literature" into account. Any scholar involved in studies in oral tradition realizes that this would be an impossible task. What is more, I set out quite specifically on pages 4-7 the limited scope of the bibliography: the oral-formulaic theory, as denoted in the title as well. To criticize a volume for not being something it has not tried to be is facile.

2. *Inclusion of Russian Formalism, East European scholarship, etc.* Apart from the fact that I specifically excluded parallel fields from the bibliography in order to make it useful for those who read the title and take it seriously (pages 5-6) and tried to offer only a sampling from adjacent fields to help the user to further reading, Jason makes a gross error in her characterization of my presentation of South Slavic materials, which she calls "by far not adequately represented." If Jason were trained in South Slavic—and I speak from the perspective of five years' field and archival research in situ on this score—she would realize that the native Yugoslav authors I cite in the book are in fact the leading authorities on the subject. There is no mystery about this point; they are commonly acknowledged by their peers as the best, and that is why I chose to include some samples of their work.

3. *Parry Collection.* The most surprising show of general ignorance of the materials she supposedly controls lies in her remarks about the Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University. It is well recognized, even among Yugoslav scholars, that the Parry Collection is the finest, most complete archive of Yugoslav oral material anywhere in the world, and this is due in large part to the fact that David Bynum has arranged for copies of sound and transcribed material from major archives in both Belgrade and Zagreb. This is the kind of information that graduate students should know.

4. *Relevance of entries.* I am almost embarrassed to have to point out that

Jason's questions about inclusion demonstrate that she is unfamiliar with the questioned materials. The Homeric items she questions, for example, deal directly with the subject of the bibliography (oral-formulaic theory and research), as anyone who has read them would know. I have no quarrel with people who question materials *after* they have taken the time to read them, but to criticize on the basis of ignorance of those materials is unprofessional and finally quite ridiculous. It is best to read what one professes to know about.

In short, while we all merit criticism of our scholarly undertakings, Jason's misrepresentations do a disservice to serious researchers everywhere. She simply makes mistakes that no well-trained, disciplined scholar should make. Moreover, in this case those egregious mistakes are the only introduction a prospective user of this book will have to a resource that might be quite helpful in its focused coverage of one aspect of "oral literature." I hope you agree that your readership deserves better than that.

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REPLY TO PROFESSOR FOLEY

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate very much your publishing Professor Foley's reply to my review of his book. Difference of opinion furthers scholarship.

I am glad to find Professor Foley recognizes that "oral formulaic theory" does not include all that scholars have done so far in research of folk literature; unfortunately, neither the Introduction nor the choice of entries in his book are as clear on this point. To put things straight, I surely admire Parry & Lord's collecting activity; yet their copying of other people's collections in order to put these at the disposal of American students, although an act of generosity, does not augment their own collection.

Let us hope that somebody will volunteer to prepare a subject index for the bibliography, so that it may serve not only philologists but students of folklore as well.

Sincerely,
Heda Jason
Jerusalem