

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

FINNEGAN, RUTH. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. A Midland Book. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992. xxiv + 299 pages. Bibliography, index, photos. Paper US\$14.95; ISBN 0-253-20708-8. Cloth US\$35.00; ISBN 0-253-32200-6.

Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context was first published in 1977 by Cambridge University Press. The work was welcomed by experts and academicians in the field as it was "found ... useful enough as a general overview of the subject." The 1977 edition was obviously based on "the state of the art" at that time. The author unhesitatingly recognizes that a "great expansion" was made during the 1980s after the publication of the work. On the other hand, Finnegan feels that "many of its central questions still remain at the heart of the subject, and that the viewpoint from which the book was written is one I still recognise and value." To bridge these two aspects the author came out with the present version in 1992.

In the first edition of the book, the author stated that the work "does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of the incidence and forms of oral poetry throughout the world," and that "it is not therefore directed to specialists, but to those students of literature or sociology who would like to have some general introduction to the controversies and findings concerning oral poetry."

In Finnegan's words, the "book is about oral poetry—its nature and its social context and significance—treated comparatively." *Oral Poetry* consists of eight chapters along with a brief concluding comment. It deals with various approaches to the study of oral poetry and its composition, style, performance, transmission, distribution, and publication. The book also includes chapters on oral poets and their audiences, and on the poetry's context, function, and links with society. The author addresses many much-debated questions like whether there is a distinctive form of oral composition and a special oral style. She also deals with various theories on oral literature, including as much evidence in the form of examples as possible.

In her introduction Finnegan deals with the important issue of defining oral poetry. Finnegan's opinion on this issue is worth quoting:

The three ways in which a poem can most readily be called oral are in terms of 1) its composition, 2) its mode of transmission, and 3) its performance. Some oral poetry is oral in all these respects, some only in one or two. It is important to be clear how oral poetry can vary in these ways, as well as about the problems involved in assessing each of these aspects of "oralness." It emerges that the "oral" nature of oral poetry is not easy to pin down precisely. (17)

Citing concrete examples, Finnegan finds that :

1. the nature of oralness is relative and often ambiguous;
2. a fairly wide approach should be taken to the concept of oral poetry—it would be

- unrealistic to confine it to more restrictive definitions;
- 3. more stress should be laid on the aspect of oral performance;
- 4. oral poetry is constantly overlapping into "written poetry."

In chapter 2 of the book the author describes in brief the various theories of folk literature, including the romantic, evolutionist, historical, geographical, and sociological approaches. Finnegan appreciates the monumental efforts of Stith Thompson, but points out that "the method is clearly more difficult to apply to poetic than prose texts. For with poetry it is harder to argue that the essence of the piece lies in the subject-matter—in certain motifs" (42). Finnegan also praises the oral-formulaic theory; she points out the "mostly detailed controversies" and opines that "provided that the more ambitious claims of some exponents are treated with caution, the Lord-Parry school provides a body of work which cannot be ignored by any student of comparative oral literature" (72).

Finnegan makes case studies of several oral-poets: a seer from a Fijian village, an epic minstrel from Yugoslavia, an American Negro prisoner, and an Eskimo poet. To me, this section is the most interesting in the whole book. Finnegan then divides the oral poets into the three categories of specialists, experts, and occasional poets. In the course of her discussion the author raises another basic question: Are oral poets "anonymous" and "communal"? She admits that in one sense it is an attractive possibility that there are elements of anonymity and communal participation in oral poetry. At the same time, she warns against the exaggerated application of this hypothesis. As counter evidence she presents cases of known individual authors, of the practice of "personal poems" in some societies, of the legal ownership of certain categories of poem, etc. She comments:

It is sometimes tacitly assumed that the productions of poets in some sense stand for the whole society; reflecting the views and aspirations of the people at large and being essentially "their" culture; so that even if one individual poet can be recognised as the composer or performer, she is really speaking not as himself, an individual, but as the "voice" of the community.... There is a sense in which it is true, but too facile an acceptance of this stance can lead to misassessment of the role of poets and poetry. (205)

Considering the relation between folk-poetry and society, the author asks: Does one type of poetry always go with a particular form of society? Here is her answer:

The attractive theory of a relationship between a particular type of society and a particular genre of poetry turns out to be less promising than it seems at first sight. Its initial attraction lies largely in its ambiguity, and once one tries to resolve this, it turns out to be either tautologous or, at best, doubtful. (253)

Finnegan proposes no theoretical conclusions in her book. Nevertheless, *Oral Poetry* does contain some concluding comments. These may be summed up as follows.

- a. There is nothing peculiar to "oral poetry" in nature, composition, style, social context, or function that radically distinguishes it from written poetry;
- b. Oral poetry appears in the most highly "literate" and industrial settings as a normal and valued manifestation of human artistic expression and activity;
- c. Many things can be learned about written literature by considering the "oral performance" element in oral poetry;
- d. The composers of oral poetry are active, imaginative, and thinking beings, not prod-

- ucts of the "social structure";
- e. To ignore the existence of the huge wealth of oral poetry throughout the world, in the present as well as in the past, is to miss one of the great sources and products of man's imaginative, reflecting, and dramatic faculties—all of the things that make him a social animal.

Finnegan regrets the absence of musicological analysis in her work. Musicology is undoubtedly an important part of the analysis of oral poetry, but no researcher can cover every aspect of a subject in a single work.

The only reservation I have concerns Finnegan's avoidance of the occasional instances of what might be considered "sexist language" and her elimination of some of the repetitions.

Oral Poetry concludes with a select bibliography and a detailed index. The standards of the materials, printing, binding, and proofreading are high. I congratulate Finnegan for her multidisciplinary approach and hope that in the next edition of this book she will be able to incorporate oral poetry from other parts of the world, particularly South Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East.

Syed Mohammad SHAHED
University of Dhaka
Dhaka -1000, Bangladesh

MIEDER, WOLFGANG and GEORGE B. BRYAN. *Proverbs in World Literature: A Bibliography*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. xiv + 305 pages. Hardcover US\$42.95; ISBN 0-8204-3499-X.

This bibliography shows at a glance what has already been done in proverb studies and what is still open territory. For example, Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Luther have been thoroughly studied, Charles Dickens and Benjamin Franklin less so, and William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Mark Twain hardly at all. The English, German, and French languages have many entries; also represented are other European and African languages, but there are few studies based on Asian materials.

The bibliographical entries are arranged alphabetically under the names of the authors. The range of sources is wide, extending beyond literature proper. Each entry gives the journal or book title in full, which makes it easier to find the correct reference quickly. (It would have been good to reprint the entire source reference in the case of multiple entries, instead of just giving the number where the source first appeared.) The contents are nicely arranged, with enough space to easily distinguish the entries and to make notes in the margins.

There is an index of scholars. In these days of computerization, several other indexes could have been prepared as well, such as ones listing sources, languages, and proverbs treated. Perhaps this lack can be remedied in the future by publication in CD-ROM form. In the meantime, this is a handy reference volume.

David R. MAYER
Nanzan University
Nagoya, Japan