

**Reading the English epic: changing noetics
from *Beowulf* to the *Morte Darthur***

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Epic is arguably one of the earliest and most universal of literary genres; it is found in a developed form among the most ancient written records of cultures from China to Greece, and has been recorded as oral narrative on every inhabited continent (Havelock 1963: 94, Finnegan 1976: 25, 109¹). From these ancient roots an exuberant, varied yet unbroken tradition of heroic narrative has grown in Western culture, with modern offshoots such as *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy proving that Western sensibilities still thrill to the resonance of epic tales. The survival of this literary mode is due to many complex factors, both psychological and social, to discuss the exact nature of which lies beyond the scope of my study. Their most significant result, however, can be clearly stated, namely the unchanging presence of a central spirit of individual heroism lying at the core of all narratives classed as epic, from Homer or the *Liauja* tales of the Congo (Finnegan 1976: 109) through to Tolkien or Edward Zwick's 2003 film *The Last Samurai* (*Last Samurai*, 11 June 2005:¶1). While this spirit has remained unaltered, the form in which it is expressed has obviously changed with the vagaries of human society, allowing it to reflect our literary, social and psychological development. This study aims to explore the effects in epic literature in English of one such development, namely the psychological effects, in the form of changed noetics, of the internalisation of writing.

Writing is arguably the most important technology ever stumbled upon and utilised by humankind. At first glance, calling writing a technology may seem inappropriate, yet since it uses tools, results in a physical product and leaves residue, the description is just (Ong 2002: 519). However, this places writing on a par with other vital technological inventions, such as the wheel, or the microchip, which may make my initial claim for its importance seem undeserved. Writing is important because it made possible the release and subsequent flowering of vast

¹ The long episodic prose narratives Finnegan mentions have been called epics (e.g. by De Vries 1963: 159), though she prefers to limit the use of this term to poetry.

latent abilities in the human psyche, which had no outlet in earlier oral civilisation; these abilities in turn made possible the development of the institutions and technologies that characterise modern society. Without writing, the world would not be what it is today. This study will focus on an area of human endeavour among those perhaps most greatly influenced by writing, namely literature. Our concept of literature, as the word itself shows², is thoroughly formed by our literacy. Before writing, poetic discourse was profoundly different from the literature we create today. The ramifications of this claim will become clearer as the paths along which the development enabled by writing has travelled are set out in more detail. These paths have been traced by such theorists as Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, Eric Havelock and Walter J. Ong. This study will examine two stages along this journey as they are manifested in *Beowulf* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Every culture has particular methods of structuring and storing the knowledge gained in the course of life experience. These methods can be termed the culture's noetic processes. One of the major forces shaping these noetic processes is the technology of writing, which W.J. Ong argues was invented only once in the entire history of the human race (1982: 89). A profound difference exists between the thinking of cultures that cannot write, which are termed oral cultures, and cultures that use writing, which are called literate cultures. Within these two groups, various subtypes have been described by Ong. Primary orality is 'the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print'. Chirographic and typographic cultures are cultures that have to some extent internalised writing and printing respectively. Secondary orality describes 'present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print' (Ong 1982: 11). Oral residue is 'habits of thought and expression tracing back to preliterate situations or practice, or deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture, or indicating a reluctance or inability to dissociate the written medium from the spoken' (Ong 2002: 314).

² 'Literature' is derived from the Latin *litera* meaning letter of the alphabet (Ong 1982: 11).

At various stages in the histories of cultures, the development or adoption of writing has forced traditional noetic processes to shift dramatically from oral to literate patterns, sometimes over the span of a few hundred years, as in ancient Greek culture, or in a single generation, as in many former colonies in the twentieth century. One place these effects can be studied is in the literature of a culture, which is 'a window into the world view of a particular society, its values and beliefs' (Kaschula 1993: vii). This study will examine two works of literature, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which reflect some of the effects of this shift from orality to literacy.

Both these works have that central radiant spirit of individual heroism characteristic of epic, and comparison with traditional definitions of epic show that they both share other characteristics of the genre also. Epic can be defined as a long, verse narrative on a serious subject. The setting is ample and the main character heroic, even quasi-divine. His superhuman deeds are significant or legendary achievements, central to the traditions and beliefs of his culture, and on his actions depends the fate of the nation. The language of the epic is 'elevated', ceremonial, removed from the language of everyday life. Traditional style includes such features as beginning *in medias res*, episodic structure, invocation of the muse, formulae, similes and catalogues. The plot usually involves 'machinery', or intervention by divine beings, and a visit by the hero to the underworld (Baldick 1990: 70-1, Abrams 1993: 53-56, Newman in Preminger & Brogan 1993: 362, Bennett & Royle 1995: 208, Peck & Coyle 2002: 35-6). These seemingly arbitrary characteristics have been highly valued and slavishly or unconsciously imitated in English literature throughout its history, and many of them still function in modern works like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, mentioned above. But rather than being arbitrary, the characteristics of the genre are the results of its rootedness in oral society and in oral noetics. This rootedness is shared by the traditionally valued ancient epics, among them Homer's poems, *Gilgamesh* of the ancient Middle East, the *Pentateuch*, and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*.

Though all these ancient epics ultimately spring from oral roots, we only know of them because they exist in writing, which excludes a purely oral provenance. Epic as a narrative form depends for its creation upon an oral tradition supported by an aristocratic and heroic culture, yet, paradoxically, the epic poem as we habitually conceive it cannot be *experienced* as a single unified and coherent whole until its generative culture has given way to a later stage of development, one in which writing is used in the recording of texts (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 99).³ Yet these texts, heavily influenced by oral culture, have opened the door to our modern understanding of oral literature, which begins with the work in the 1920's of Milman Parry, and after him, of Albert B. Lord. Their research gave rise to what is known as oral-formulaic theory, out of which has grown a fuller understanding of the nature and functioning of epic as a genre, as will be explored below.

Parry began with extensive research into the literature of Homeric Greece and carried out fieldwork collecting the oral performances of pre-literate Yugoslavian bards. After his premature death in the early 1920's, his work was continued by Lord. The crux of oral-formulaic theory is that composition, authorship and originality in a primary oral society do not mean the same as they do in our thoroughly chiro- and typographic world. From an examination of the ancient Greek epics and shorter epic songs he collected from Yugoslav singers, Parry notes that both show a high proportion of repeated phrases, lines and sets of lines within individual songs and across groups of songs. Various scenes and narrative features, such as arming before battle, feasting or sending a letter, are also often repeated. This leads to the idea of formulaic composition. Rather than composing each line anew, and approaching each story as an individual entity, the singer instead builds a line, a scene, a song, and eventually every individual performance out of a stock of metrical lines, which he already knows and has used

³ Modern examples of oral literatures, epic and otherwise, for example the Yugoslav heroic poems collected by Parry, Lord and others, and the Xhosa praise poetry studied by Jeff Opland, differ from these ancient epics. Firstly, with modern technology the poetry can be recorded as performance, not just as text, and secondly, the recorders are literate but of a different culture from the poets, meaning that the recorded poems are perhaps more purely oral than the ancient extant examples. However, all epics recorded for study, whether in writing or using audiovisual media, are no longer purely oral. Scholars have documented that the mere presence of a researcher recording the performance causes the oral poet to change the tale slightly according to the researcher's supposed expectations (e.g. Ong 1982: 146).

before. He learns this stock of lines through his long training consisting of listening to other singers from childhood.⁴ This ready-made line Parry calls a formula, and defines as ‘a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea’ (Lord 1960: 30). Parry stresses that a formula has to combine the characteristics of repetition and of usefulness (Opland 1983: 157). Lord goes on to insist that analysis of the proportion of formulaic to non-formulaic phrases in a particular song could distinguish between an oral-styled text produced by a literate author and a transcription of the performance of a truly oral poet (1960: 130).

Similarly, the narrative units that make up the plot of a narrative epic tale are formulaic. Various definitions of these have been attempted and terms, such as theme or type scene, invented for them. All refer to a traditional block of narrative or description, which is repeated by a particular singer in one or more songs, and by different singers across the tradition. Specific formulae or types of formulae may be associated with particular themes. As with formulae, themes are never absolutely identical in a word-for-word manner, even in successive performances of the same song by the same singer. Rather they have a core meaning, a potential function allied not specifically only to the plot of the story being told, but to the mythology and social structures of the society as a whole; this core meaning remains unchanged as long as that function and that cultural structure do not change.

This theory changes the meaning of authorship. A singer, singing a particular tale at a particular historical moment, is of course the author of that version of the song. Within the wider tradition, however, that song, a narrative covering basically the same subject matter, exists in the repertoires of other singers stretched diachronically and synchronically across the history and geography of a people. Then, on an even wider scale, the song belongs in a genre, such as the song of the journey home of a hero after long absence, or the song of the capture of a city

⁴ Most primary oral cultures do not have female singers of epic poems, though Finnegan, for example, records oral poetry sung specifically by women in her *Oral Poetry in Africa* (1976). In this discussion, then, the oral poet will be referred to as ‘he’.

(Newman in Preminger & Brogan 1993: 865). Some of the formulae the poet uses he will adapt to the particular situation in the act of singing; many he will use as he learned them. The final 'author' of a particular performance of a song is thus a matter for debate. Is it the individual poet who gives shape to the actual historically-pointed performance, the tradition which produced the formulae and the themes, or the history of humankind with its poetry and symbolism reaching back to prehistory? In Saussurean terms, epic is not the individual poem existing in one performance, a *parole*, but 'an especially rich cultural competence', a *langue* (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 99).

Similarly, the place and value of originality is very different in an oral society. Lord stresses the usefulness of the formula as its vital characteristic (1960: 65). For an oral poet this usefulness must be two-fold: firstly, a formulaic device has to be useful to him as poet in making rapid extemporary composition of extensive songs possible, and secondly, the people listening to and participating in his performance have to recognise the formulaic texture of the verse, the texture that separates the poetic from all other types of utterance. In this situation, originality plays a vital but limited role; a poet has to adapt his material to the particular circumstances of that performance for that audience, expanding or contracting themes and substituting particular formulae for others. The final limitation on his changes is the audience and their expectations. A listening rather than a reading audience has a low tolerance for innovation, which adds to the already sizable burden of following purely by listening a complicated narrative, redolent with ethical, religious and aesthetic material. 'The domain of praxis can endure just so much language play' (Parks in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 48, 51). The poet in each performance must strive to find the balance between boring his audience with a stale rendition, and losing them with too unfamiliar a tale.

The link between poet and audience is language, and it is in the domain of language that the poet has to find this delicate balance of old and new. The function of language can be seen as being to enable us as human beings to break the seamless fabric of existence, of our experience

of reality, into units, so that it can be grasped and then expressed. Poetry, which is concentrated expression, performs this function perhaps most immediately, especially in oral culture, where language and literature are most closely and organically linked, and their joint origin in human psychological and social prehistory is most clearly apparent. The oral poet becomes a poet because he is born with a greater grasp of the *langue*, a greater ability to make expressible in language the advancing tide of human experience, and this ability is then developed by his training.⁵ In the highly formulaic structure of oral poetry the poet's talent for adapting traditional songs to particular occasions and audiences is this ability to create meaning, to force existing vocabularies to express new experiences. The ancient literatures called transitional because created by societies changing from oral to literate are, of course, a prime example of this. In this literature, the old style is forced by the influx of new cultural influences to adapt, in order to make the new experiences understandable, assimilable.

Oral-formulaic theory's questioning of accepted concepts such as authorship suggested that our modern understandings of other basic concepts might be equally biased by our literate preconceptions. The place and function of poetry and the poet are examined, as they occur in a primary oral society rather than modern Western society, by the classical scholar Eric A. Havelock. He begins by examining Plato's actual use in the *Republic* of the much-discussed term *mimesis*. Rather than referring narrowly to the artwork's reflection of reality, the word, as Havelock demonstrates, actually includes in its meaning impersonation, the whole of the poet or reciter's method of verbal representation, the active personal identification of the audience with the performance, and the entire basic context of poetry as such (1963: 26, 30). The poetry that Plato so controversially exiled from his republic is obviously very different from what we mean by poetry today.

⁵ A mediocre poet will merely make efficient use of formulae and themes, while a poet of genius will use these traditional materials sensitively, drawing on the core meaning of each formula to exploit its full poignancy and creating patterns of parallelism and alliteration, so fashioning a poem 'of the highest artistic value' (Lord 1987: 63).

Havelock explains this discrepancy by exploring the role of poetry in a primary oral culture, in this case that of Homeric Greece. Without writing, the only real store-place for knowledge is the human memory, since mnemonic devices, extensively used in oral societies, only stimulate and aid memory and cannot actually store information themselves. In such a culture, knowledge is incredibly fragile and valuable. Human memory has to preserve not only the secrets of local habitat and survival skills, without which the people will die of want and disease, but also the details of history, myth and the moral and ethical codes of the culture, without which human society cannot exist or maintain itself. Human memory is thus the only bulwark against extinction. In such a society vast amounts of energy, and all available techniques, are used to protect and add to the communal remembered store of knowledge.

Poetry, which is fundamental to human society, is utilised in this quest to remember. In fact Havelock argues that the vital function and actual *raison d'être* of poetry is noetic and mnemonic. The job of the poet is 'to supply metrical encyclopaedias' (Havelock 1963: 29). Every feature of oral-formulaic composition, as outlined by Parry and Lord, can be traced back to this overriding need to remember. Historical facts, details of trade techniques (such as how to embark on and dock a ship), ethical and moral mores have to be repeated over and over so as not to be forgotten, and thus they become the themes of oral poetry; these themes combine together to form the plots of epics. 'The real and essential 'formula' in orally-preserved speech consists of a total 'situation' in the poet's mind' (Havelock 1963: 82). Oral poetry is highly active in that verbs are more important than nouns (Havelock 1963: 189), as when genealogies are presented as lists of begettings and births, rather than just lists of names. Another example is from Anglo-Saxon poetry, where the noun 'sea' becomes 'whale-riding'. This active cast of oral poetry stems from the fact that a visualised action is easier to remember than a static object. The episodic nature of epic plots arises because narrative units clustered around a central event or character are easier to remember (Havelock 1963: 175)⁶. Abstract cause and effect slip easily

⁶ The fact that Aristotle cavils against this in his *Poetics* (1982: 53) is evidence of how far he had moved away from oral roots into literate noetics.

from the memory, and so become instead the actions of gods with motives and attributes that are human and so easy to remember (Havelock 1963: 170). Thus epic is the major genre of so many oral cultures because it is best suited to the mnemonic requirements of oral noetics. The elastic sense of history found in epic can be explained because only those facts relevant to or resonant with the present are remembered (Havelock 1963: 124-5) resulting in the fused plots, compacted chronologies and even complete changes of character documented in the various forms of the same tales recorded at different times (De Vries 1963: 49).

The cultural function of oral epic demands that it aid mnemonic processes, and also that it inspire action, moral, ethical and pragmatic. So epic poetry uses rhythm both because it aids memory and because it is itself praxis, action, and so suited to telling of and inspiring action (Havelock 1963: 167). Formulaic phrases are highly metrical and rhythmical because rhythm is a way to bring the body's somatic and kinetic resources to bear on memorisation. The strumming of the harp, Havelock surmises, serves the same purpose (1963: 150); the rhythm of the playing stays constant so the words can be varied as necessary without breaking the essential sameness necessary for remembering. The ceremonial nature of this style, where form is preserved for its own sake, aids memorising of the content contained in the form (Havelock 1963: 95).

This understanding of oral poetry has implications for cognitive and perceptive processes. Firstly, 'such enormous powers of poetic memorisation could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity' (Havelock 1963: 45). *Mimesis* is total identification, emotional and physical as well as intellectual, of both audience and singer with the story. With all available energy devoted to remembering, especially to the highly visual recreation of action, there is none left for analytical thought or for creating abstract categories and concepts. So, a second consequence of oral noetics is a concern with the plural and its consequences, for example the individual instance of an unjust action by a particular person, not with the abstract, universal concept of justice (Havelock 1963: 185). In ethical matters, the oral mind cannot formulate rules

of conduct, only describe its effects (Havelock 1963: 222). Each character can therefore, as the plot proceeds, at different times embody both good and evil. This contributes to the famous 'grand manner' of epic, its dispassionate quality, where moral judgement is not passed (Havelock 1963: 69). Thirdly, in oral noetic processes there is no universal present. Actions are time-bound, presented in paratactically-linked episodes (Havelock 1963: 180-1). Related to this is a fourth consequence, namely that primary epic, unlike a literate world-view, presents knowledge as image, rather than as concept (Havelock 1963: 261). This is what Plato's *Republic* is moving away from. As writing was internalised sufficiently to make the old mnemonic processes unnecessary, energy was available for the creation of universal abstractions free from ties to individual character or opinion, and so the Forms, the Ideas, were born (Havelock 1963: 263-4). The active, concrete, agent-orientated cast of oral discourse is not merely stylistic ornament, but 'an embodiment of the psychological preconditions of the act and process of communication' in a primary oral society (Biakolo 1999: 43).

These oral noetic structures shape human behaviour and even the human self. The loss of objectivity, the overriding concern with memory and tradition characteristic of orality produces a hero we have lost forever in our typographic world. He is utterly committed to the tradition, which is the paradigm of his oral society; he cannot question it, since questioning would divert energy from the vital task of remembering, so endangering not only the individual but society as a whole. Homer's genius lies partly in his oneness with, his profound acceptance of, his society because of his role as its memoriser (Havelock 1963: 89). The Homeric man displays 'a degree of automatism... counterbalanced by a direct and unfettered capacity for action, in accordance with the paradigm he [has] absorbed' (Havelock 1963: 199). This absorption is, importantly, unconscious. The poet is unaware of his almost totally didactic function and thinks more of pleasing than of teaching (Havelock 1963: 61 n.2). The rhythmical nature of oral poetry functions to pleasure the senses of the audience, to create an atmosphere of relaxation and recreation, free of anxiety and tension, in which poetry is shared (Havelock 1963: 152-3), and in which its teaching is most thoroughly and unconsciously absorbed. What Hesiod, writing just

after Plato, speaks of as 'the pleasurable spell cast by the honeyed Muse upon his audience' can be seen as

...a form of hypnosis in which emotional automatism played a large part, as doing leads to doing and image precipitates image... In sum, these aspects conferred on the Greek epic powers of evocation, of grandeur, of psychological fulfilment, unique after their kind. They could not supply the descriptive and analytic discipline, but they could supply a complete emotional life. It was a life without self-examination, but as a manipulation of the resources of the unconscious in harmony with the conscious it was unsurpassed. (Havelock 1963: 190)

The Homeric man was not intelligently self-conscious, but imaginatively conscious (Havelock 1963: 198 n.5).

Oral epic, as the depository of the knowledge of the people, has magisterial as well as educational status (Havelock 1963: 94). The word Plato uses to describe the fields of human activity over which Homer and poetry used to preside, and which should now fall under the rule of philosophy, is *diokesis*. Roughly translated, this means 'management of life' (Havelock 1963: 80). In a primary oral society, usually relatively primitive technologically, the risk of death due to want is ever-present, and the provision of food, warmth and security a paramount objective. The practical result of this is that 'the boundary between moral behaviour and skilled behaviour in an oral culture is rather thin' (Havelock 1963: 80). In the Greek epics we see the kings, Agamemnon for example, offering sacrifice, arbitrating, judging and also singing songs to the harp, as well as performing mighty deeds in battle. The king is not only a warrior, but also a priest, a judge and a poet. In fact, in the practicalities of an oral society, the king can only rule, enforcing laws and making decisions, if he knows the traditions and values of his society, which exist in the traditional songs. The king is the one with the best oral memory, the best feel for verbal rhythm (Havelock 1963: 126), and the songs he sings are vital for the continuation of his society. The words 'art' and 'artist' as we use them today cannot be translated into high classical Greek (Havelock 1963: 33), for no concept of an aesthetic separate from practical everyday life existed.

Epic poetry, in this theory, has one further vital function. A society in which all energy is devoted to the preservation of knowledge will soon become extinct unless it has evolution mechanisms enabling it to adapt to changes in its circumstances. This is one reason why, as Havelock puts it, tradition 'always requires embodiment in some verbal archetype...some kind of linguistic statement, a performative utterance' (Havelock 1963: 41-2). Placed thus outside the individual, the tradition forms the common background against which individual actions and decisions are measured, and where the society as a whole can grow and change. Havelock suggests that individual experiences, joyful and sorrowful occasions in the lives of ordinary people in classical Greece, were celebrated in shorter lyrics now lost to us because they were not remembered or recorded. Though not permanent in the sense that epics were in these cultures, these lyrics by their very ephemeral nature were probably more open to creativity than epics (Havelock 1963: 93 n.9). Linguistic and cognitive developments could and probably did take place here, but unless these changes registered in the tradition of the society, they would remain isolated individual instances and have no effect on the culture as a whole. Unified abstracts and concepts are not found in Homeric discourse, or that of any primary oral society (as discussed above), because the linguistic facilities to name them are lacking (Havelock 1963: 256). In the happening that is the individual performance of an epic tale, in the balance between the poet's deeply felt need to preserve the traditional and the necessity of his pleasing and interacting with his audience, a space exists where linguistic change is not only possible but mandatory. The tradition of any group, the 'sort of common world-view, embracing an account of the history both of the human group and of the environment in which it lives' (Havelock 1963: 291) is the fabric of epic, and so epic has to continue to express the actual reality of the lives of the group, including any new challenges and experiences. Any change in the epic tradition in response to these challenges happens not by the creation of new words primarily, but by the forcing of existing words into new syntactic situations and usages (Havelock 1963: 298), enabling the people to grasp and survive the exigencies of human existence.

It is by this mechanism that oral epic adapts to the noetic changes brought about by writing. This change has been the study of W.J. Ong, who concentrates on ‘first, thought and its verbal expression in oral culture...and second, literate thought and expression in terms of their emergence from and relation to orality’ (1982: 1). Since noetic processes are rooted in language, says Ong, a deep disparity can be expected in the primary-oral and typographic perception of words. We, a typographic society, live with words that are things, objects that can be caught in the physical space of a page and looked up. Words for us have a location, a focus, a trace. In an oral culture, however, words are occurrences, events (Ong 1982: 31). They can be recalled from memory, but once uttered they disappear, of necessity, because only with the death of one spoken word can its successor live in time (1982: 32). In an oral culture, then, speaking, sounding words, is always ‘a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought’ (Malinowski, quoted in Ong 1982: 32). This mode of action is considered powerful, as is seen in the commonly held belief among primary oral peoples in the magical potency of words (Ong 1982: 32).

This restriction of word to sound has consequences, as Havelock points out, for the thought processes of primary oral people. Their characteristic noetic modes, different from those of chirographic and typographic people, are summarised by Ong. He stresses firstly the great preponderance in oral thought and discourse⁷ of mnemonics and formulae, because in an oral culture you know what you can recall (Ong 1982: 35). Orally based thought and expression show secondly, a formulary, ceremonial appropriation of history; thirdly, standardisation of themes; fourthly, epithetic identification for ‘disambiguation’ of classes or individuals; fifthly, heavy/ceremonial characters; sixthly, cultivation of praise and vituperation; and lastly, copiousness (Ong 1976: 417). Each of these characteristics can be explored in more detail.

The first oral characteristic is formulaic or stereotypical structure, related to mnemonic functioning. Mnemonic features of oral discourse include a tendency to additive rather than

⁷ Literature, a word derived from writing, is unsuitable in this context.

analytical thought. Unlike written text, oral discourse can have a simple additive structure because the full existential context within which it occurs gives the clues necessary to clarify its meaning, clues which written discourse has to supply itself, in the form of more elaborate and fixed syntactical structures (Ong 1982: 38). This is a problem for students of early oral-influenced texts; we have very little information about these extratextual contexts, making any findings hypothetical at best. Within a simple additive structure, then, oral poetic discourse tends to use stereotypical traditional tonal patterns, words, phrases and plot sections, as will be further discussed in chapter 2.

The second characteristic of oral noetics is a formulary and ceremonial approach to history. Since knowledge is hard to come by, and in a primary oral culture difficult to preserve, a highly traditionalist or conservative mindset is characteristic of such cultures. This is why the figure of the wise old man or woman is so important in their stories, as they must have been in their daily lives (Ong 1982: 41). Wise Nestor in the *Iliad* and aged King Hroðgar in *Beowulf* are examples of such men, whose role is different from that of the hero but no less vital.

Where knowledge is hard-won and life precarious, memories that are no longer useful are dangerous to preserve since they use energy needed for more vital remembering. Oral communities therefore tend to be homeostatic, living in a perpetual present and sloughing off memories no longer applicable to everyday life (Ong 1982: 46). This has several consequences. Firstly, the vocabulary of oral communities is always rooted in present life conditions, since dictionaries and etymologies belong to the literate world. If the meaning of a word becomes obsolete it disappears completely. Epics, which are essentially conservative, do sometimes retain archaic words, but in so doing keep these words part of current poetic if not everyday usage. When even these words become so old as to be meaningless, they are either forgotten or remain part of the tradition as empty features of style, as is found in children's games, and in the drum-speak of some African tribes (Ong 1982: 47). Secondly, history also is kept relevant; the poet tailors genealogies and events so that they are meaningful and acceptable to the particular

audience and situation. Since the original facts have no other record, this evolving history is the only history that exists in an oral culture (Ong 1982: 48). This explains how heroes cross cultural boundaries, so that Attila for example appears in songs all over Europe (De Vries 1963: 196-7). The tale's importance lies in its nature as a shared domain of imagined reference, whatever might be the complexities in the *mimetic* relationship between fiction and the world. Oral societies often take their tales quite seriously, as the ancient Greek attitude toward Homer shows (Parks in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 48). It could be argued that many Medieval and Renaissance paintings showing ancient subjects with the figures in contemporary clothing and settings result from residual orality in the cultures that produced them; only so were the old stories relevant to the people who painted them. Once history books and written records appear, history and language lose this easy fluidity, and become less closely linked with present human life.

The third characteristic of oral noetics is standardisation of themes. While all conceptual thinking is to some extent abstract, in oral cultures these necessary abstractions are minimised by using them in situational, operational frames of reference close to the human life-world (Ong 1982: 49). For example, oral subjects identify geometrical shapes by giving them the names of objects: a circle is a plate or a moon, a square a mirror or a door (A.R. Luria quoted in Ong 1982: 51). This inevitably restricts or standardises the subjects that are addressed in the poems and how they are presented, which has a variety of effects. Firstly, oral epics function to support and teach social structures that maintain the society that produces them. These structures are socio-economic, political, religious and psychological codes and belief systems. These systems cannot be abstractly conceived, but instead have to be embodied in the characters and events of the plot. Beowulf does not preach the virtues of hero and ruler, but lives them out. He is heroism embodied.⁸

⁸ The well-known gnomic utterances of Anglo-Saxon poetry derive their authority ultimately from the lives of the heroes who live them out.

Secondly, such a style of knowledge, where everything is kept integral to human life and experience, keeps knowing an act empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (Ong 1982: 45-6). Writing separates the knower and the known, as Havelock first pointed out. Without it, objectivity is impossible. Oral thoughts and songs do, however, have an impersonal quality, in that they are bound by the very formulae that make any storage of knowledge possible, so that everything known is not personal or subjective, but rather framed in the communal 'soul' (Ong 1982: 46). This characteristic of ancient epic where, as Plato correctly understood, the audience identifies completely with the heroes, Achilles, Hector and the rest, has been irremediably lost in literate societies. Effects of this change can be traced for example in the inward turn of romance, where the interior lives and motives of the characters become much more important than in the brute external world of the *Iliad*.

Thirdly, words are seen as actions in primary oral society. Ong follows Jousse in using the term 'verbomotor' to describe cultures either primary oral or still retaining high oral residue, cultures in which actions and attitudes depend much more on the effective use of words, and so on human interaction, and much less on non-verbal, mostly visual input from the world of objects, than our thoroughly literate world does today (Ong 1982: 68). In such cultures, rhetoric is accorded a much more important place in everyday life; the bargaining process in a Middle Eastern bazaar is an example, where purchasing something is more of a verbal duel, a contest of wits, than a plain economic transaction (Ong 1982: 68). A request for information too in these cultures is commonly interpreted interactively, as agonistic, and rather than merely giving the required information in answer the questioned person will probably parry the request, for example by answering with a riddle (Ong 1982: 69). The personality structures fostered by a verbomotor culture are, in some ways, more communal and externalised, and so less introspective, than among literate people. Psychologists have found that while literate people tend to internalise schizoid behaviour, resulting in their withdrawal into a personally constructed dreamworld, oral people instead tend to manifest similar tendencies in external actions of an extremely confused nature, which can often be violent. This behaviour has been captured in the

languages of several cultures, in the Scandinavian word *berserk* and the Asian word *amok*, for example (Ong 1982: 69).⁹

The fourth characteristic is a tendency to epithetic identification. Aggregative thought is also closely tied to the formulaic necessity of oral memorisation. Elements of thought and discourse are remembered more easily if they occur in clusters, and particularly in parallel clusters, such as noun-epithet aggregations: a brave soldier, a beautiful princess, a sturdy oak (Ong 1982: 38). This is apparent in the famous Homeric epithets: Odysseus is always wily, Nestor wise, and so on (Ong 1982: 39). This feature of oral thought is partly parent to the prevalent 'heavy' or 'flat' characters found in oral stories. These epithetic aggregations function on one level to provide a hermeneutic context for the character. By linking the king in this particular story to the good kings of the tradition known to the audience, the poet renders him easier to interpret in the tight timeframe of oral performance. A characteristic of these aggregations is their tenacity; since they have been laboriously developed over generations, and vital narrative structures have been built round them, they are not to be lightly separated or analysed. Even when they have opposites, these too are formulae: the unhappy princess, the braggart soldier (Ong 1982: 39).

The fifth oral characteristic is a ceremonial and simplified characterisation. Oral memory functions more easily if the things to be remembered are associated with 'heavy' characters, 'persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public' (Ong 1982: 70). The larger-than-life heroes of epic are therefore arguably not created for artistic or consciously didactic reasons, but for purely pragmatic, unconscious mnemonic purposes. Such figures too tend to be type figures, and to be given aggregative epithets, for the same reason. Where sheer magnitude or stereotypical character is not enough, the element of the bizarre is often introduced; Cerberus is easy to remember because he has three heads, and Cyclops because he has one eye. These characteristics can be seen also in non-human figures: the incredibly high

⁹ In *Beowulf* the hero on occasion exhibits signs of the berserker, as does Arthur in the *Morte Darthur*; this will be explored further in chapters 2 and 3.

beanstalk Jack has to climb is an example (Ong 1982: 70). Similarly important are numerological groupings, such as the Three Fates, the Three Graces, the Twelve Tasks of Hercules. Though many factors, including deep psychological forces, are involved in producing these formulaic devices, their mnemonic function ensured their survival in an oral culture (Ong 1982: 70). With the liberation from such mnemonic shackles brought by writing, type characters could develop into the round characters of the modern novel, the hero into the anti-hero (Ong 1982: 70), and the marvellous into the fantastical.

The sixth characteristic of oral noetics is agonism. In an oral society where all verbal communication occurs by word of mouth, in the give and take of argument, both speech and thought become agonistically toned. This tendency is accentuated by the physical dangers and hardships of early societies (Ong 1982: 44-5). Social structures also encourage competitiveness. In large, concentrated population groupings like cities, disease is the major killer, but in the small isolated villages of primarily oral cultures, as in Anglo-Saxon England, small population and fierce competition for resources make war rather than disease the major source of fatalities (Diamond 1999: 277), and the speech and poetry of the people reflect this agonistic nature.

The last oral characteristic is copiousness. Redundancy is a necessary consequence of the oral need to keep what is being discussed securely in view, since backtracking to check up on previous points is impossible. Thus repetitions of what has been said are vital, and even profoundly natural to human thought; the sparse, linear activity of analytical thought (and the linear structure of written discourse) is possible only because the slow speed of writing (approximately one tenth of oral communication) allows the mind time to separate and reorganise its natural redundant processes (Ong 1982: 40). Such redundancy, called *copia* in the field of rhetoric, is also invaluable in oratory, particularly persuasive oratory. The speaker has to be sure that even the slowest member of the audience has understood a point before the next can be propounded (Ong 1982: 40-1). The slow, formal pace of epic plots, with repeated description of each arming, mustering, arrival or departure, can be traced back to this tendency of oral

thought, as can the technique of parallelism found in epic. Havelock's theories illuminate two further characteristics of oral *copia*. The first is the absence of lists. The famous catalogue of ships in book 2 of the *Iliad* and the genealogy of Christ in the first chapter of Luke's gospel are oral versions of lists (Ong 1982: 42). In both of these a long series of what are actually discrete facts is turned into linked catalogues of human actions, as described by Havelock; in the first, a survey of kings and the countries they actively rule over, and in the second, a succession of begettings and births. Secondly, the absence of any sense of the eternal present, described by Havelock, means that technical knowledge cannot be understood or presented as rules, which is the form the textbooks use today. Rather, the plots of epics allow these skills to be shown in action, so that listeners learn them by a kind of poetic apprenticeship, by observing an expert (Ong 1982: 43).

Thus, together the theories of Parry, Lord, Havelock and Ong interlock to form a very useful structure for the study of noetic shift in literary works. The focus of this study is primarily stylistic, in a context of literary anthropology; as such, it falls for the most part outside the radius of contemporary post-structuralist theory. Though Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory was first formulated nearly three-quarters of a century ago and Havelock and Ong's noetic theory fifty years ago, these theories' discoveries address issues of human society's psychological development so fundamental to our understanding of literature, as of many other facets of human society, that their ideas can still provide fruitful results in a study such as this. Emevwo Biakalo has criticised Ong's theories, suggesting that the results of a stylistic investigation of individual oral-influenced works should not be expanded into generalisations about the style of oral works as such (1999: 61); since his misgivings are prompted by the phenomenological theory uses to explain the patterns he observes rather than the patterns themselves, the use of these patterns in this study is not objectionable. Also, this study focuses on noetic shift, so that synchronic comparison of works from the same period of a culture's development, which Biakalo suggests are suspect, is avoided in favour of diachronic comparison of works from successive periods.

...Diachronic study of orality and literacy and of the various stages in the evolution from one to the other sets up a frame of reference in which it is possible to understand better not only pristine oral culture and subsequent writing culture, but also the print culture that brings writing to a new peak and the electronic culture which builds on both writing and print. In this diachronic framework, past and present, Homer and television, can illuminate one another. (Ong 1982: 2)

The work of Havelock and Ong, particularly, give a detailed picture of primary oral noetics and their expression in human society, as described above. Finnegan has pointed out that orality and literacy are both 'inescapably complex phenomena' (1988: 2), in which findings for one culture should only with care be extrapolated to different societies. This study therefore focuses on a diachronic investigation of the effects in the epic literature of one culture, English culture, of the shift from primary oral to literate noetics which began with the introduction of writing to England with the Gregorian evangelisation of 597 AD.

Our knowledge of primary oral epic in English is of course conjectural, based on the transitional texts produced only after the pristine oral culture had adopted writing and was in the process of internalising this new technology. From this period the most obvious work to fall into the epic genre is *Beowulf*, and so the second chapter of this thesis will trace in the poem the oral residue Ong describes, and compare the poem's probable functioning in Anglo-Saxon society with Havelock's ideas of the role of Homeric epic in ancient Greece. The society that gave rise to the poem had only very recently left primary orality, so signs of oral residue, including oral-formulaic composition, should be very heavy. This will provide a base, as it were, from which the development of literate noetics can be traced. For, as a literate society moves further from its oral roots, the life-blood of epic begins to fail, so rooted is it in oral noetics, and its place in society and its vital energies have to be taken over by other genres. This study will trace one of the possible routes taken by this shift, from epic, such as *Beowulf*, to romance, such as the *Morte Darthur*.

Gillian Beer has described two types of romance, the long, epic-based aristocratic romance, and the concentrated, ballad-type popular narrative (Beer 1970: 6). The roots of this second line of

romance literature, which lie in ballad and folk-tale, explain not only the existence of the first but also the closeness of both to epic in origin and function in oral society and the secret of the continued appeal of this type of literature, a secret that could perhaps best be described as fundamental human relevance. A.N. Wilson wrote of George MacDonald:

He is the great chronicler of the inner life, the mapper-out of what takes place when the subconscious is allowed free range and – in dream or fantasy – tell us stories about ourselves which with our conscious minds we would not necessarily understand or might not be strong enough to bear. (Flieger 1997: 79)

MacDonald is a literate author writing for a literate society. His literate, post-romantic critic assigns to MacDonald as individual author the task of making human life and the human self graspable in language. In a primary oral society, as Havelock shows, this is rather the role of epic as a communal competence, brought to fruition by the individual bard. In some transitional societies and after, romance becomes the major vehicle as oral residue decreases and the importance of the individual poet increases. So in the bright light of the English Renaissance's rediscovery of the classical, Malory writes his *Morte Darthur*, Shakespeare his epic history cycles, and Spenser the *Faerie Queene*, the 'first major work to combine romance and epic successfully' (Merchant 1971: 47). From this period, Malory's epic romance will be studied and the presence of residual orality in the work assessed. This oral residue can be expected to be lighter than that in *Beowulf*. As C.S. Lewis says in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, 'the first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship...is to know...what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used' (1942: 1). As we have discussed, the function of epic heavy with oral residue is vastly different from that of literature in our century, and so the criteria used to judge *Beowulf* and the *Morte* have to be appropriate to their heavily oral nature. Therefore, the seven characteristics of oral noetics mentioned by Ong will be used as indicators of oral residue in the two works, and the relative change observable in each of these characteristics will provide a more detailed insight into the mechanisms of the shift from oral to chirographic literate noetics.

CHAPTER TWO

Beowulf

2.1. Introduction: the oral noetic context of *Beowulf*

According to Ong, early twenty-first Western society is undergoing a paradigmatic shift in noetics, as late typographic literacy gives way to rising secondary orality (1982: 11). A similarly unstable noetic environment existed in England when the epic poem *Beowulf* was composed, as originally oral Anglo-Saxon culture absorbed the changes brought by Christian missionaries, one of which was literacy. As intricately interwoven with other factors both literary and historical into the texture of the poem as are the multiple fantastical figures of knotwork on an Anglo-Saxon carved cross or illuminated page, the various effects of these noetic forces can be traced in the poem using Ong's seven characteristics of oral discourse. But first, the historical and noetic context of the poem must be spread out as background for this investigation.

Beowulf refers to historical events that occurred in north-western Europe during the Age of Migration in the fifth century, and an early form of the poem existed by the later half of the eighth century; the only existing copy was penned around the year 1000 in the golden age of Ælfric and the Benedictine revival, in a manuscript now known as Cotton Vitellus A.XV. The poem stands alone in the Anglo-Saxon corpus as the only heroic poem of sufficient length to be called an epic, though various fragments, such as *Waldere* and *Finnesburg*, suggest a wider tradition now lost. Epic as a narrative form depends for its creation upon an oral tradition supported by an aristocratic and heroic culture (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 99). When *Beowulf* was written down, this tradition and this culture were, as mentioned above, in the process of profound change, adapting to the coming of Christianity and with it, literacy.

Most modern scholars assume a mixed oral-literate, sometimes called 'transitional', origin for *Beowulf* (Olsen 1988: 153). The manuscript is a careful creation, clearly made for a reading

audience, unlike for example that of *The Song of Roland*, whose untidy appearance suggests that it is a copy for the personal use of a troubadour performing the poem (Robinson in Godden & Lapidge 1991: 158). Though its elements probably existed as part of the *langue*, the cultural competence of Anglo-Saxon (or the wider Germanic) poetic tradition, the complete poem called *Beowulf*, as we have it today, did not exist before literacy. A poet able to write the complete tale down was doing something new, so the rules of primary oral poetry changed. The poem was still intended to be heard rather than read, however. A useful term for discourse of this type is *vocality*, which implies that whatever the site of formation of the poem, its medium of production and reception is the human voice. The original audience and singer of *Beowulf* formed what anthropologists call a high context group; to produce signification, a poem showing vocality, like a poem from a primary oral society, still depends greatly on the extra-linguistic context, including the shared knowledge of the speaker and hearer, the stories, myths etc that could be conjured by a name. The very formulaic nature of the poetry signals its rootedness in this extra-linguistic context (Schaefer in Foley 1992: 498), which consists of the poetic tradition and the lifeworld of the people.

Anglo-Saxon society of the late first millennium was pre-feudal, increasingly literate and deeply Christian, and was ruled by an aristocracy with a power-base of land-ownership, the stability of which depended greatly on close ties between the rulers and a class of warrior thanes (Niles in Foley 1992: 363). Rivalry between individual kingdoms and civil strife (Whitelock 1951: 88), together with the threat of invasion (Vikings in the seventh and Danes in the eighth centuries), created a society in which the martial values of the traditional Germanic *comitatus* ethic remained central. The story of the fondness of Alcuin's Lindisfarne monks for heroic tales of Ingeld, and evidence of the persistence of the feud system well into the twelfth century (Whitelock 1951: 13) bear this out.

These martial values are those described by Tacitus, with bravery and loyalty the supreme virtues and fame their most desired reward. The persistence of these values meant that the ruling

class remained an aristocracy individualistic, martial and male. The power of individual character, embodied in the hero of epic, determined in Anglo-Saxon politics the power of individual kingdoms. An example is King Edwin, the first Christian king of Northumbria (d. 632), who through sheer force of character was also the first king to win the allegiance of almost the entire country (Grose & McKenna 1973: 22).¹ The aristocracy consisted of warrior thanes, as is seen in the world of *Beowulf*, where women are important solely as evidence of the glory of their men-folk, and the lower classes are conspicuous by their absence, only represented by the runaway slave who discovers the hidden treasure (Grose & McKenna 1973: 48).

Before the advent of literacy, oral tradition presumably held a central place in this Germanic aristocratic society. As with many, though not all, primary oral traditions, this tradition was poetic.² In the synchronic production and reception of traditional discourse the values, mores, control systems and archetypes of society were created and reaffirmed, and in the diachronic transmission of the discourse from singer to singer these systems were maintained and evolved. In the absence of any extensive knowledge of the religion of pre-Christian England the *comitatus* ethic forms the basis of our modern assessment of this tradition. Even after the coming of Christianity this ethic continued to be the major constituent of the extra-linguistic context of the poetry, because it remained the major moral framework of Anglo-Saxon society, as described above. Themes of combat and social order are found in poetry involved in the transmission of control systems preventing anarchy, control systems that are the realisation of the power of the aristocratic ruling class. The heroic code is 'personified in the heroes of epic, who served as models within their tradition. Through them cultural laws are transmitted and sustained' (Feeny in Foley 1992: 197). If any new concepts and meanings were to evolve in the Anglo-Saxon society of the late first millennium, they could only do so against the shared

¹ This emphasis on personal leadership by a king as defining a nation died slowly, with any true sense of abstract nationality generally thought to be visible for the first time in the tenth-century *Battle of Maldon*.

² Prose did not develop into a flexible tool until Ælfric, three generations after Alfred, whereas poetry had, from tradition, a fully developed native rhetoric, which educated authors could employ as soon as English became the primary medium of the book culture (Niles in Foley 1992: 366).

background of the *comitatus* ethic and of traditional poetic language. These two necessities unite in *Beowulf*.

It was into this vital poetic tradition that Christianity had to be incorporated. As will be argued below, the values of the *comitatus* ethic are actually fundamentally similar to core Christian virtues, for in both belief systems mortality is faced and transcended by a guiltless figure (the hero, or Jesus) accepting death to save his people, in the hope of eternal life, either in fame or in heaven. The Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition had evolved 'to deal above all in tragedy: man's predicament in the face of hostility, with only his ideals (especially loyalty to his lord – on earth or in heaven) securely beyond the reach of evil' (Quirk, Adams & Davy 1975: 8). *Beowulf* is evidence of the process of incorporating Christian ideals into traditional discourse, which in a society still ruled by vocalicity was the means by which they were incorporated into consciousness. The seeming ambiguity of the Christian-pagan position of the poem is resolved if its vocalicity is kept in mind. The mode of production had to keep to the traditional mode of reception, otherwise it would not be accepted (Schaefer in Foley 1992: 496).

This very vocalicity places *Beowulf* at the centre of opposing tensions. As is mentioned above, meaning in such discourse is produced largely by reference to the extra-linguistic context. This restriction to context is largely absent in a text that becomes a self-contained system of signification. Self-containment is a prerequisite for the autonomy of a work of art, and textuality is a prerequisite for self-containment. Vocalicity keeps a check on the growing textuality, and so on the growing autonomy, of literature (Schaefer in Foley 1992: 499). As a heavily oral poet the writer of *Beowulf* is unable to objectively examine his society, yet as a partially literate poet he is beginning to feel a painful separation from the tradition that formed his consciousness. He wants to evolve, but his poetry's vocalicity binds it to tradition. This pull of opposite forces forms the theme of *Beowulf*, which can be read as an elegy for the passing Germanic culture, and because the poet feels strongly the beauty of both the fading tradition and the fresh Christian faith, the struggle gives to the poem power and poignancy. Anglo-Saxon poetry is unique in its

Germanicness both in the Indo-European group and more widely (Niles in Foley 1992: 362). Societies do not evolve along set patterns, so Anglo-Saxon conditions cannot be paralleled today, and have probably never been, not in ‘pastoral, tribal Africa’ or in ‘ancient Greece with its rocky island kingdoms and its maritime and inland city-states’, or even on the Germanic parts of the Continent (Niles in Foley 1992: 362). The six hundred years of Anglo-Saxon history is as long as from the writing of the *Canterbury Tales* to today. Late Anglo-Saxon poetry is different from the early lays brought over by the settlers, both in the objectives they served and the tastes they catered for (Bradley 1982: xii). *Beowulf* is thus a unique record documenting a unique moment of social and linguistic evolution. It will be examined according to the seven characteristics of oral discourse outlined by Ong and listed in Chapter 1.

2.2. Stereotyped / formulaic expression

From the traditional opening ‘*Hwæt!*’³ the formulaic style of *Beowulf* would have signalled to an Anglo-Saxon audience its nature as poetic discourse, and so its links to the authority of the entire poetic tradition that accompanied poetic discourse in such an oral society. The formulaic nature of heavily oral discourse is, of course, the ‘elevated style’ attributed to the epic genre. From the time of Aristotle a general (if vague) feeling has prevailed that a measured, refulgent style is necessary to do justice to the grand epic subject. Havelock, Lord and Ong argue, as discussed in Chapter 1, that epic style is rooted in the psychological and physical necessities of life in a primary oral society. In *Beowulf* we expect to see signs of change in this traditional language also.

The strict alliterative form of *Beowulf*'s metre shows it to be embedded in tradition, since this form is shared by closely similar verse in continental Old Saxon, Old High German, and Old Scandinavian (Quirk, Adams & Davy 1975: 6). The consistency of form over the six centuries

³ All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from Wrenn C.L. 1973. *Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment*. 1973 Edition Fully Revised by W.F. Bolton. London: Harrap, and line references refer to this edition.

and thirty thousand lines of the Anglo-Saxon corpus demonstrates the truth of Havelock's statement that no remembered discourse can exist outside traditional language. As oral poetic discourse these lines show a dense concentration of stereotypical or formulaic devices. A useful working definition of a formulaic device is any set or standardised verbal expression, which implies language markedly fixed or rigidified 'in a way beyond what the ordinary lexical resources of the language would normally lead one to expect' (Ong 1971: 289). *Beowulf* shows various levels of formulaic elements, varying with increasing complexity from tone through diction and formula to theme, and each of these levels will be explored.

The first level of formulaic device, important in all oral poetry, is tone. As only written texts of Anglo-Saxon poems remain, this level can perhaps be most usefully explored through comparison with other oral traditions. Southern Bantu praise poetry uses melodic or tonal formulae in performance, with poetic discourse generally uttered faster and at a higher pitch than ordinary prose utterances, and marked into stanzas by formalised cadences and glides (Finnegan 1970: 130, 137-8). Formulaic tones of this sort can be postulated for the traditional monosyllable *Hwæt!* found in so many Anglo-Saxon poems. Word and tone would act together as an immediate gateway into the realm of traditional signification, the entire extra-linguistic context. Tone is also used in *Beowulf* to create mood; the funeral pyre sections abound in low unrounded back vowels in the last stressed syllable of each line (Feeny in Foley 1992: 196), which creates a solemn and mysterious tone suitable to the rituals described in these sections. Ritual laments are traditional in many primary oral cultures (Opland 1983: 147-9). Feeny postulates then that the language of the funeral-pyre sections originates in the ritual dirges of ancient religion, in which it would have had a magical function (in Foley 1992: 196).⁴ The preservation of such patterns demonstrates the conservative bent of vocality, with the largely literate Christian audience of the tenth century poem aware only of a communal feeling that the telling of funerals has to be cast in this form.

⁴ Feeny notes that oral Serbian charms use this same hypnotic rhythm, and low back vowels to give them 'a mysterious tone' (in Foley 1992: 196).

The next level of formulaic style is poetic vocabulary, the ‘wordhoard’ of Anglo-Saxon verse. Like any idiom this hoard is produced ‘in a fluid compromise among idiolect, dialect, and language as a larger entity’, and is not static or monolithic (Foley in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 38-9). *Waldere* and *The Fight at Finnesburg*, thought to belong to the seventh or eighth century, show the traditional poetic language fully developed (Godden in Hogg 1992: 509). The language of primary oral discourse contains all knowledge and meaning, so the existence of a strong and satisfying traditional poetic word-hoard developed long before the advent of literacy is not surprising. This same language is used imaginatively but without developing new terms in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, about a battle that occurred in 937, while the still later poem *The Battle of Maldon*, dated later than 991, includes only a few importations from prose and Norse vocabularies (Godden in Hogg 1992: 509). This suggests that traditional language remained relevant enough to be retained almost unchanged.¹⁰

This traditional poetic language, often called classical Anglo-Saxon, is the language used in the four major manuscripts. It has specific syntactical features. It is a dialectal mixture of the late West Saxon that was the written standard of the time (around 975-1000) and elements of other dialects and earlier forms. There is evidence that poets used forms not current in their own normal dialect, and that scribes recognised certain spellings and grammatical features not current in their own usage as appropriate to poetry (Godden in Hogg 1992: 496-7), suggesting that the advent of literacy did not immediately weaken the power of poetic language.

The wordhoard of *Beowulf* is rich and varied, with fully one third of the total number of distinct headwords unique to the poem (Cameron, Amos & Waite quoted by Godden in Hogg 1992: 510). The poem shows an imaginative and individual but not particularly innovative use of the traditional wordhoard, showing its poet to be heavily influenced by oral tradition, or content to use traditional language to convey his message. Simply by using traditional poetic diction the

¹⁰ This continued relevance could have various causes; perhaps because some of the function of traditional discourse passed to written prose, so poetic language did not have to adapt to express new concepts, or because the meanings of traditionally poetic words changed.

Beowulf poet places his poem in the mainstream of the Germanic poetic tradition, which as mentioned above is very ancient, and more importantly, which is fundamental to the worldview of his audience. Traditional poetic Anglo-Saxon has unique words (both simplexes such as *beorn* ‘man, warrior’ or *guma* ‘man’ and compounds like *hronmere* ‘whalesea’); inflected forms (such as *genimeð* rather than *genimð* 3sg.pr.ind. for *geniman* ‘to take’); and syntactic features (such as omission of demonstratives) (Godden in Hogg 1992: 495). The specifically poetic words are almost always nouns or adjectives and only very seldom verbs or adverbs (Godden in Hogg 1992: 501). Some are merely archaic, which is a product of the conservative cast of oral noetics, but others have been shown by comparison with Norse cognates to originate presumably in a very early poetic diction in Common Germanic (Godden in Hogg 1992: 496). *Beowulf*’s conservatism can be compared to the *Dream of the Rood*, for example, which features many startlingly vivid verbs occupying stressed positions in the lines (Godden in Hogg 1992: 512). This difference can be linked to the *Dream*’s innovative Christian subject matter, which contrasts with *Beowulf*’s fairly traditional heroic theme.

In *Beowulf* the poet uses a range of synonyms, poetic and otherwise, particularly for ‘man’ and ‘sword’. This could reflect the encyclopaedic function of epic described by Havelock, with the poem presenting a ‘rich tapestry of social types and metallurgical specialities’ (Godden in Hogg 1992: 499). Though some studies have attempted to discover patterns of use distinct enough to prove this idea (e.g. Brady quoted by Godden in Hogg 1992.) the general paucity of linguistic knowledge about Anglo-Saxon makes any firm conclusion difficult. In general the vocabulary of the poem does not seem to be abstruse or technical, and referents are almost entirely restricted to the recognizable and the familiar (Wrenn 1973: 57). This is characteristic of oral thought processes, which stay close to the human life-world (Ong 1982: 42).

The compound words characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon poetic wordhoard are many of them very ancient, with close parallels in other Germanic languages which are often also restricted to poetry; examples of such words include *modsefa* ‘mind’ and *gifstol* ‘throne’ (Godden in Hogg

1992: 500). As with the simplex poetic words, these compounds are almost always nouns or adjectives (Godden in Hogg 1992: 501). These compound nouns linked by unstressed, colourless verbs, together with other poetic characteristics, such as a lack of demonstratives, work together to make the classical Anglo-Saxon line very compact, and semantically heavy (Godden in Hogg 1992: 505), contributing to *Beowulf*'s feel of epic grandeur. The semantic concentration of individual compounds adds richness to the poetry, and in *Beowulf* is used to present complex social relationships in compact form. The term *wine-mæg* is an example; it combines the friendship tie of *wine* 'friend' with the blood relationship of *mæg* 'kinsman' (Godden in Hogg 1992: 500) and when used to describe king or leader demonstrates the closeness of the social tie between ruler and subjects. Other compounds bind the poetic and everyday world together, for example the seemingly redundant *modsefa*, which as mentioned above is very ancient in Germanic poetry. Both parts of the compound mean 'heart, mind' but *mod* is mostly used in prose and *sefa* in poetry (Godden in Hogg 1992: 498). Thus the formation of compounds as a feature of Anglo-Saxon poetic diction reflects clearly the nature of oral poetry: deeply rooted in everyday life, reinforcing and propagating social structures, and yet maintaining for poetry a privileged status separate from other discourses.

Apart from traditional compounds Anglo-Saxon poems are rich in new-minted combinations also, and *Beowulf* is particularly distinguished in this area. Compared with other surviving poems it appears to have both the greatest variety of compounds, and the greatest number of compounds formed of words not found compounded elsewhere in the corpus (Brodeur quoted by Godden in Hogg 1992: 510). However, the absence of any other purely heroic poem of significant length with which to compare *Beowulf* makes it difficult to decide how much of this style belongs to a tradition of heroic poetry and how much to the individual poet's genius (Godden in Hogg 1992: 510). A class of compounds illustrating the poet's inventiveness is the group of synonyms for 'mail-coat', which includes *gryre-geatwe* 'terrifying-armor'; *guð-byrne* 'war-corselet'; *guð-getawa* 'war-gear'; *guð-gewæde* 'war-garment'; *heaðo-reafe* 'battle-

garment'; *heaðo-wæd* 'battle-garment'¹¹; *here-byrne* 'army-corselet'; *here-net* 'army-weave'; *here-pad* 'army-coat'; *here-syrce* 'army-mail'; *here-wæd* 'army-garment'; *hilde-sceorp* 'battle-dress'; *hioro-serce* 'war-corselet'; *guð-searo* 'battle-armour'; and *heaðo-byrne* 'battle-corselet'. According to the glossary of Wrenn's edition of *Beowulf*, only the last two are found outside the poem. By using the various permutations of a few common elements, an almost bewildering variety of terms is created, alliterating on ten different letters, according to whether the compound is used in the first or second half-line. What the exact connotations of each term would be for a contemporary audience is an intriguing mystery.

Other mysteries, however, poetic diction can be used to clarify. *Beowulf* shows two careful linguistic patterns, one of syntax and the other of diction. Firstly, in syntax, in their speeches together Unferð is given no *þæt*-clauses and Beowulf ten (Greenfield 1972: 131). This definitely seems a stylistic attempt to differentiate the two characters. Secondly, in diction, terms in the first half of the poem denoting 'retainer' and 'follower' are used for the Danes (who are in the land of their king) and words for 'fighter' for the Geats (who are there to kill Grendel) (Godden in Hogg 1992: 510). An audience listening to the poem would surely find this distinctive word pattern useful for following the action through the maze of oblique kennings (see section 2.5) and unclear pronominal references characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry. These patterns seem evidence of the skilful use of traditional diction by a literate poet able to revise his work. Literate or not, the poet sometimes nods, as when Wiglaf in the midst of his desperate sword fight with the dragon is called *gar-wiga* 'spear-fighter' (1.2674a, Godden in Hogg 1992:510).

The next level of formulaic device is the formula itself. Parry's definition of the formula is 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea' (Opland 1983: 157). According to this definition *Beowulf* is indubitably highly formulaic. F.P. Magoun Jr analyses the first 25 lines of the poem, and finds that only

¹¹ Our limited knowledge of Anglo-Saxon makes it impossible to determine the exact connotations of near synonyms such as *reaf* and *wæd*.

26% are non-formulaic, that is, not matched elsewhere in the corpus either repeated verbatim or in part (Magoun 1953: 449). Such formulaic character, however, is consistent with vocality.

The Christian formulae in the poem, for example *heofena helm* and *God eaðe mæg* (Whitelock 1951: 10), show that the poet was influenced by texts either directly or by hearing them. This influence was felt throughout the corpus in that in two ways it allows formulae to be created more rapidly (Cassidy in Mandel & Rosenberg 1970: 28). Traditionally, Magoun suggests, new formulae are created very slowly, because singers usually find all they needed in existing formulae. Now firstly, the dowry of the Mediterranean-Christian intellectual tradition, both Roman-Hellenic and patristic, was available through *florilegia* (collections of sayings from the Fathers), the liturgy, and prose sermons (often vernacular) to laity as well as the clergy (Bradley 1982: xviii), and secondly, the poet had more time outside the pressures of performance to form new phrases (Cassidy in Mandel & Rosenberg 1970: 28, n. 7).⁵ Over the three centuries between Cædmon's poetic revolution in the late seventh century and the recording of *Beowulf* a profusion of formulae expressing Christian ideas had developed. Religious prose in Anglo-Saxon was itself highly formulaic and rhythmical; although Ælfric for example avoids poetic diction, his late tenth-century sermons convert patristic writings into alliterative prose so close to verse that it is sometimes printed as such (Grose & McKenna 1973: 41-2). The poet is not infallible, as in l.2292a for example, where a formula is used with a sense not entirely suited to the context. The poet is telling how the thief stepped close to the sleeping dragon's head, and then says, '*Swa mæg unfaege eaðe gedigan / wean ond wræc-sið, se ðe Waldendes / hylde gehealdeþ*' 'So may one not fated to fall easily survive / grief and exile, who the Ruler's / favour rules over' (ll.2291-3). The thief is on the run from his master, but as a lower class person he can hardly be called exiled; his escape does seem miraculous enough to be ascribed to divine favour, but is from the dragon and not from human enemies, unless the gnomic phrase refers back ten lines to the thief's gift of the stolen goblet to his master along with an appeal for forgiveness, which seems strained. The formula seems introduced purely to alliterate on [w].

⁵ These two factors probably also contribute to *Beowulf*'s particular richness of compound words.

For the most part, however, the *Beowulf* poet is at ease with the stock of heroic formulae inherited from Germanic tradition. He even uses them ironically. When the hero describes as *snottre ceorlas* ‘wise men’ and *hwate Scyldingas* ‘brave Danes’ the thanes who wrongly conclude from the blood in the lake that he has been killed and return home without him (ll.1591, 1601), he is surely being ironic. The formula *blæd/lof wide sprang* ‘glory/fame leaped far’ is a familiar heroic phrase in the poem (l.18) and in the corpus. The poet adapts it with gruesome humour to *hra wide sprang* ‘the corpse leaped far’ (l.1588) of Grendel’s decapitated body (Godden in Hogg 1992: 503). This irony is local and suited to the narrative situation rather than satirical of society, for ‘few poets thoroughly in a tradition take a harsh view of those themes that have been the life’s blood of that tradition for centuries’ (Niles in Foley 1992: 360).

The next level of formulaic structure is plot, which is described in terms of themes. A looser definition of ‘theme’ than Lord’s original concept is useful for Anglo-Saxon poems: a theme is ‘a concept or general idea embodied in a narrative action in which recurrent elements ... serve to remind the reader of earlier occurrences of that concept’ (Kahrl quoted by Olsen 1986: 579). Within a theme, ideas are maintained in a relationship so that they form ‘complexes... held together internally both by the logic of the narrative and by the consequent force of habitual association’; the same kind of structure exists between themes, which are held together in poem by a ‘tension of essences’ (Lord 1960: 96). Use of these themes sets up two hermeneutical spaces: they signal links with the entire extra-linguistic context outside the individual poem, and they signal clusters of essences within the poem. The *Beowulf* poet uses both these spaces to great effect.

Comparative research has yielded a variety of themes common in the oral discourse of various cultures, many of which are found in *Beowulf* (Olsen 1986: 579-81): those associated with battle (Beasts of Battle ll.3024-7, Feud ll.1068-106), death (Song of Death ll.2446b-61a, Sorrowful Journey ll.2117b-20, Taylor in Creed 1980: 266, 263), society (Joy in the Hall ll.88-90; Assembly with Speeches ll.1316-396) and space (Sea voyage ll.1903-13, Ramsey 1971: 54;

Traveller Who Recognises his Destination ll.217-24a, Clark, 1965: 646) for example. Feeny (in Foley 1991: 196) has investigated the Funeral Pyre Theme, for three such pyres are described in the poem. In addition to the tonal formula described above, these lines also show a metre unusual for the poem as a whole. Thus in performance these sections would through their aesthetic form as well as conceptual content resonate with each other, and also with the tradition as a whole. As mentioned above the roots of the verbal production of these scenes may lie in their ritual content. Lord suggests in fact that all oral traditions have their roots in magic, in the attempts of humanity to establish contact with otherworldly influence on human existence (in Feeny in Foley 1992: 196). As mentioned in chapter 1, Ong describes this belief in the physical power of words as characteristic of oral societies (1982: 32).

A royal woman presenting the mead-cup at a feast is a small narrative unit, which could be called a mini-theme, that occurs three times in the poem: Wealhðeow in ll.612-41, Hygd in ll.1980-3 and Freawaru and Wealhðeow in ll.2015-31. Royal women appear at other points in the poem, such as the Finn lay (*fitts* XVI-II), Wealhðeow's appeal to Beowulf (*fitts* XVII and XVIII) and the digression of the wicked wife of Offa (ll.1925-57), but this mini-theme is the only clear narrative unit involving women which is repeated in the poem. The three instances of the mini-theme show a relatively high degree of conceptual and verbal correspondence. The role of royal women in Anglo-Saxon society is probably reflected in the cluster of actions presented in this theme: attending the feast, distributing treasure and offering round the mead-cup. This cluster of actions is accompanied by a cluster firstly of descriptive ideas: the woman is gold-bedecked and brings good to the people in some way; and secondly of stave roots: *x – bæŕ* in the b half-line, and *x – sæld* in the a half-line, both associated with the giving of cup or treasure, and *x – hroden* in either half-line associated with adornment (see Table 2.1).

Of the three occurrences of the theme, the first is the longest at eighteen and a half lines, and also the fullest, particularly in the descriptive details associated with the queen. This is understandable because Wealhðeow is a far more prominent character in the poem than either of

the other two women. She bears a dual role, on the one level as a semi-historical character in her own right, necessary to the plot, and on a deeper level as a type character, the ideal queen embodying society's formulation of that role. She would thus call out in the poet more of the traditional ideas and phrases associated with a queen at a banquet.

Table 2.1: Theme of Royal Woman Offering the Mead-cup at a Feast

Section		Wealhðeow ll.612-41	Hygd ll.1980-3	Freawaru (F) and Wealhðeow (W) ll.2015-31
Action	attending feast	X	X	X
	distributing treasure	X		X 2018-9 (W)
	offering cup	X	X	X 2021b-4a (F)
Description	gold-decked	<i>grette gold-hroden</i> 614a <i>beag-hroden cwen</i> 623b <i>eode gold-hroden</i> 640b		<i>geong, gold-hroden</i> 2025a (F)
	lover of the people	<i>cynna gemyndig</i> 613b <i>freolicu folc-cwen</i> 641a	<i>lufode ða leode</i> 1982a	<i>friðu-sibb folca</i> 2016a (W)
Formula	x – bær	<i>medo-ful ætbær</i> 624b	<i>lið-wæge bær</i> 1982b	<i>ealu-wæge bær</i> 2021b (F)
	x – sæld	<i>ful gesealde</i> 615b <i>sinc-fato sealde</i> 622a		<i>secge sealde</i> 2019a (W) <i>ðær hio nægled-sinc/ hæle-</i> <i>ðum sealde</i> 2023b-4a (F)

The second occurrence of the theme is by far the smallest, being only three lines long, lacks both the idea of treasure distribution and of gold adornment for the woman, and has no *sæld*-root formula. It is important, however, because its function in the narrative reveals the underlying 'tension of essences', to use Lord's phrase, underlying this particular mini-theme. The appearance of the queen at the feast celebrating the victorious return of Beowulf is not unusual, since the royal woman offering the mead-cup seems part of the larger theme of the Feast. However, this small narrative detail is apparently all that sparks off Beowulf's prophecy of the fall of Heorot (ll.1999-2069), which he gives in response to Hygelac's questions about his trip (ll.1983-98), directly after the lines describing Hygd. Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld does not prevent a renewal of his feud with Hroðgar. The third occurrence of the mini-theme occurs within Beowulf's speech. Thus, paradoxically, the horn-bearing gold-hung queen, symbol of domestic safety, plenty and peace, is associated at some profound level with the opposite forces of society, treachery and war, showing just how fragile human culture actually is. The custom of

giving a royal bride as an attempt to buy peace is perhaps the expression, perhaps the cause, of this symbolism. Such a bride is also described in the Finn lay (*fitts* XVI-VII).

If this association really exists, then the Wealhðeow passage must show it also. This passage occurs on Beowulf's first arrival at Heorot, and there is no suggestion at this point in the poem of strife, even of the burning of the hall alluded to so frequently elsewhere. Yet the only other narrative section in which the queen figures actively, where she voices her misplaced trust in Hroðulf and appeals to Beowulf on behalf of her sons (*fitts* XVII-III), is concerned precisely with issues of treachery and war. Moreover, this section comes directly after the Finn lay, that tale of betrayal and death. The other mentioning of a woman, the praise of queen Hygd, is the introduction of the wicked queen digression, which tells of a princess's violent and unjust actions. So it would seem that the mini-theme of the royal woman bearing the mead-cup at a feast is part of a larger complex of symbols, in which the image of a woman represents the precarious point between peace and war at which the martial Anglo-Saxon society existed. The description in the Finn lay of the sorrowing Hildegard as '*gomela io-meowlan golde berofene*' 'aged woman bereft of gold' ll.2931 suggests that a queen without gold is a symbol of strife.

The fragility of human society is one of the concerns of the poem, which J.R.R. Tolkien sets forth in *The Monsters and the Critics* (1936) as decidedly literate, an elegy by a literate poet celebrating the glories of the passing oral culture. The mini-theme just explored thus points to the particular character and genius of *Beowulf* as a transitional poem utilising the strengths of both the dying oral and the rising literate noetic processes.

2.3. Ceremonial / formulary appropriation of history

Just as the language of heavily oral poetry is largely formulary, so is the oral concept of time. Ong describes the ceremonial appropriation of history that happens in oral cultures, where past events are remembered and recounted only in patterns that are meaningful for the people's

present, with the result that ‘history’ becomes a narrative that adapts to the evolving social and psychological needs of the community (1982: 48). Such changes can only actually be traced by means of diachronic investigation, which is difficult in the Anglo-Saxon tradition considering the paucity of preserved narratives. This study looks at only one text, and so is of necessity a narrowly focussed, synchronic investigation, which means that another aspect of time, which also reveals oral noetics, must be found and followed in *Beowulf*. One such aspect is the metaphorical nature of the oral understanding of time, as symbolic and archetypal in origin. For a member of an early oral society, whom Mircea Eliade has called a *homo religiosus*, no distinction exists between subject and object. Such a person ‘exists in what Lévy-Bruhl calls *participation mystique*’ (Foley 1974: 187). Here ritual and religion meet memorisation as the central need of oral societies, as Havelock explains it, and it is in this context that history exists in oral discourse, if it exists at all. As mentioned in Chapter 1, epic as a narrative form depends for its creation upon an oral tradition that is supported by an aristocratic and heroic culture (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 99). So in order to be preserved, as mentioned above, the actual events of the life of a people have to be interpreted and found meaningful, in any of several structures: in the hierarchical heroic society ruled by *comitatus* loyalty, or in the archetypal ritual structure of psychosocial humanity. Living traditional epic is history interpreted, often using mythical frameworks. As Lord puts it,

...oral traditional literature tends to make the songs and stories from the past serve the goals of the present for the sake of the future. It is only when a tradition is dying that it begins to lose contact with the present and becomes a preserver of its own past rather than a continuator. (1987: 68)

The question then is to what degree *Beowulf* has become such a monument to past glory rather than an interpreter of present relevance.

Oral discourse tends to be expressed in timeless statements rather than syntax of process and time, which is literate (Ong 1982: 226). The Anglo-Saxon of *Beowulf* shows both these features. The many gnomic sayings are timeless on the one hand, and on the other historical sections are sequentially told, for example ll.53-64: ‘*Ða wæs on burgum Beowulf Scydinga / leof leod-*

cyning...opþær eft onwoc / heah Healfdene... Þa wæs Hroðgare here-sped gyfen... ‘Then was Beowulf of the Scyldings in the citadels beloved king of the people... until was born to him noble Healfdene... Then was Hroðgar given good fortune in war...’ (ll.53-4a, 56b-7a, 64). Foley demonstrates how in *Beowulf* hardly a sunrise or sunset passes unrecorded, and that these happenings are symbolic rather than realistic, linked to the beginning and terminating of narrative clusters; one day represents one completed heroic action, which in turn embodies at a deep communal level the triumph of order over death and life over chaos (1974: 200). The bright dawn that breaks over the hero as he at last sights shore after his duel with Brecca (ll.569-70), which is described as ‘*beorht beacen Godes*’ (l.570a), or the coming of the ninth hour, the hour when Christ died on the cross, as Beowulf’s men think him slain by Grendel’s dam (l.1600), are instances of symbolic time both Christian in colouring and reference.

A possible explanation for this is the postulated magical or ritual function of original oral discourse, which is internalised into the story itself. When poetry and religion diverge, the significance of, for example, the ritual laments described above, or ritual configurations of time, becomes less clear, and in the end these features survive as part of the extra-linguistic context, the *langue* of the people. A heroic narrative cannot reach verbal production without them. This religious origin is perhaps why poet and audience naturally associate the imagery of the new religion with these moments of symbolic ritual time.

Oral history has to be real, its singers presenting it as personal experience, as is shown by the poem *Widsið* which consists entirely of a catalogue of peoples and lands which the singer says he has personally visited. Oral history, however, has to be real within the ritual mythical framework of the *participation mystique*. The common formulaic introductory phrase ‘*hyrde ic*’ ‘I heard’ achieves both these aims, establishing a ‘dialogue of memories’ (Parks in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 51) in which audience and poet in the moment of performance convert *langue* into the individual example of *parole*. History exists because it is the entire extra-linguistic context, surrounding and including human beings, and poetic language is the gateway to this

context. As the noetic processes of the *participation mystique* change with literacy one of the earliest consequences is an awareness, totally lacking before, of an historic past when men and beliefs were different (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 90).

The *Beowulf* poet, straddling the changing eras (as Tolkien 1936, De Vries 1963, Ker 1957, and Lord 1960 all describe him), shows an uneasy compromise between identification and distancing. On the one hand is evidence of oral time. *Hyrð ic* appears often, particularly in type-scenes associated with gift-giving, e.g. ll.2163a, 2172a, linking this tale with supposed eye-witness accounts. An alternative formula also appears, namely *ne gefrægn ic...* (ll. 1011a, 1027a), ‘I have not heard (of such a gift before)’, which usefully alliterates on a different letter and even more strongly links the event being narrated with the other gifts of the entire tradition. Ll.2278-9 place the Last Survivor three hundred years before the present of the poem, yet in his elegiac lament for his people he is presented with no sense of historical distance exactly like the other characters in language and ethical motivation. On the other hand are signs of a distinct sense that the poem is set in the past. References to the sacrifices of Hroðgar’s people as heathen practices of days gone by (ll.178-83)⁶ and the overall elegaic melancholy of the poem suggest a consciousness that to the poet and his audience the characters of the story, though their own people, belong irreversibly to an era forever lost. In ll.1863b-5 Hroðgar says, ‘*Ic þa leode wat / ge wið feond ge wið freond fæste geworhte, / æghwæs untæle ealde wisan*’ ‘I know that people as one that with foe and with friend is firmly disposed, in everything blameless, in the *ealde wisan*’. Translation of *ealde wisan* involves making a decision as to how one balances these issues, because it can be interpreted as either ‘traditional way’, showing awareness of a past system in a literate, objective poet, or ‘good old-fashioned way’, suggesting endorsement of a present system by a more oral, subjective poet.

The vocalicity of the poem places it within the context of the traditional *langue*. A characteristic of this *langue* is its fluidity, which is related to the conservative bent of oral noetic processes.

⁶ I am here taking this disputed passage to be part of the original poem, not a later interpolation.

Poets borrow events, names, characters and even entire plots from any part of the extra-linguistic tradition, touching into resonance related strings of connotation and significance. This process can be seen in *Beowulf*. The Sigemund lay (ll.874-97)⁷ for example resonates within the poem itself and more widely in the tradition. Sigurð's slaying of Fafnir the dragon is here mistakenly attributed to his son, an inaccuracy slight enough to pass without objection from the audience because any reference, no matter how oblique, to this wyrm-slaying resonates between these two sections of the tradition and brings with it connotations of both heroism and tragedy entirely consonant with Beowulf's story. Similarly the mention that Sigemund's nephew-son, Fitela, is absent at the fight resonates within the poem with the desertion of Beowulf's thanes in his last battle. This recontextualising effect would have been strong for the original audience, who would understand many other references in the poem now obscure because the stories to which they allude exist in no other appropriate source, such as the tale of the *Brosinga mene* in ll.1198-201 (Whitelock 1951: 56). When actual historical events are considered, the situation is similar. Allusions range from the accurate, such as Hygelac's disastrous raid on the Frisians (ll.2354-73), recounted in Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* (Whitelock 1951: 40), through the queried, for example the existence and exact site of Heorot, to the altogether fictional, most startlingly the character of Beowulf himself.

This last point strongly suggests a literate poet. As explained above, formulaicness of language or here of allusion immediately establishes a link with the tradition as a norm, an unquestioned reference (Schaefer in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 122). Formulaic nature also stands in the place of textuality, signalling to the audience that 'This is a poem' (Schaefer in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 123), though the poem only exists as a memory, always half-immersed in the unconscious and known as text only in the becoming into consciousness (Parks in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 58). A literate poet can use a formulaic style to give his poem traditional status, unconsciously if he is not separate enough from the tradition, or purposefully. On the

⁷ The *Nibelungslied* dates from the twelfth century, later than *Beowulf* (De Vries 1963: 48), but as another form of the same tale in a different tradition affords valid comparison for this argument.

other hand, this very function of formulae to signal conventionality rather than meaning, connecting the poem 'intertextually' with the entire tradition, is the beginning of the aesthetisation, the emancipation, of poetic discourse (Schaefer in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 123). These formulae are present in the discourse of primary orality, which in them contains the seeds of writing, texts and the autonomy of written discourse. It appears that the author of *Beowulf* was reaching towards this autonomy by inventing a main character around which to build his story precisely because such a character would be free from the traditional associations other heroes such as Ingeld would be unable to escape (Wrenn 1973: 35).

So here again, the success of *Beowulf* as a poem depends on the paradoxical balance of orality and literacy. This particular balance has to be attributed to the author of *Beowulf* as an individual poet of genius, as is shown by comparison with the other heroic Anglo-Saxon poems we still have. The *Finnesburg Fragment* shows how traditional heroic matter can pass from oral to written record apparently without substantial changes. The *Battle of Maldon* must be considered a literary effort by a poet familiar with traditional Anglo-Saxon verse technique (Wolf in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 79-82). *Judith* and the other tales based on saint's lives or biblical texts have abandoned the traditional subject matter. Only *Beowulf* achieves a thorough reshaping of traditional matter and a decisive change of perspective without abandoning the traditional heroic outlook. In his case, 'orality means not only traditional verse and style but also the capacity to preserve attitudes which were essential to Old Germanic heroic traditions, now placed in a Christian context' (Wolf in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 83). *Beowulf* could only exist in a literate world, for only outside the history it depicts could the poet shape the plot to his ends.

2.4. Standardisation of themes

The vocality of *Beowulf* ties it not only to traditional modes of production and reception, but also to traditional modes of memory. Oral poetry must be easy to remember, and human beings

remember most easily matters connected with their real experiential world. Early medieval poetic discourse therefore points at the receiver's lifeworld (Schaefer in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 121). For the poet and audience of *Beowulf*, already at one remove from primary orality, this reference is no longer to the actual material facts of everyday life so much as to attitudes that structured their society, which were still those of the Germanic tradition. People were no longer buried in sumptuous barrows, but still lived by the feud system. These attitudes shape the poem on two levels, in the societal structures shown and in the themes addressed.

Two systems structure the poem's world. The first is the feud system, which sustains the poem's narrative on multiple levels. The historical backdrop for the plot is driven by feuds, and at the close of the poem Beowulf's death leaves his people defenceless against the revenge attacks of the Swedes. The Finn lay tells of tragedies brought about by feuds. Heorot is prophesied in the poem to fall because of a feud. Grendel and his mother have to be killed because as beings outside the social order they cannot purchase innocence by paying *wergild* for their victims. Grendel's mother, particularly, gains tragic depth as a character when her murder of Æschere is described as lawful vengeance for the killing of her son (l.1276-8). Hroðgar pays Beowulf *wergild* for Handscio, his slain retainer, in ll.1053b-4a. The war with dragon is called a *fæhð* 'feud' in l.2403b. Contemporary Anglo-Saxon society, as mentioned above, was equally dependent on the feud system, suggesting that *Beowulf* as epic functions as Havelock describes, setting forth the rules that govern society.

The second system is the *comitatus* ethic, described above, on which the feud system is partly based. This ethic is the motivation of the poem on every level. On hearing of the hero's arrival in Denmark, Hroðgar, who as will be shown in section 2.6 is a figure of the ideal king, immediately plans to offer him treasure in return for his services (ll.384a-5). The phrasing of ll.1046-9, '*no he þære feoh-gyfte / for sceotendum scamigan ðorfte*' 'he needed not be ashamed in front of the warriors of the giving of gifts', which tell of Beowulf's reception of these promised gifts, suggests that they are an endorsement of his bravery, an official gesture made by

the king for the benefit of the community. This gesture also endorses the position of the king, proving him worthy of his office; Beowulf justifies his good opinion of Hroðgar to Hygelac by telling of the Danish king's generosity in return for good service ll.2144-6. This reciprocal relationship between king and thane controls the power-base of aristocratic land-ownership in the society of the poem, as in Anglo-Saxon society. A repeated formula describing a crowd of warriors is '*duguþe ond geogoþe*' 'tested retainers and young warriors' e.g. l.1606. The *geogoþe* are the young untried warriors, who one day in return for good service will be given land in addition to treasure, enabling them to marry and settle down. The *duguþe* is the body of tested retainers who have already attained this status. Ll.2195-6a describe how Beowulf passes from *geoguð* to *duguð*, receiving on his triumphant return home seven thousand hides of land from Hygelac.

Though material reward is important in motivating *comitatus* loyalty, the reward of fame seems more valued, in poetry at least. As will be explored in section 2.6, Beowulf repeatedly states that a desire for fame spurs him on in his heroic deeds; his final epitaph is *lof-geornost* 'most eager for fame' (l.3182b). Part of Beowulf's satisfaction in his deeds arises from the fact that none of Grendel's kin live to boast of the monster's attacks ll.2006-9a. As a warrior gains fame by courage, a king gains it by generosity; the lesson of Hroðgar's sermon is that a king should not forfeit his fame by ungenerous behaviour.

The link between action and word, between the deed and the fame it brings, is evidence of a 'verbomotor' lifestyle, in which words are perceived as action. The extra-linguistic context reveals itself here to be not only the entire poetic *langue* but also the life-world of primary oral societies; story and life overlap. Other examples of this are seen in *Beowulf*. The coastguard ends his challenge to the arriving Geats with the gnomic saying '*ofost is selest / to gecyðanne hwanan eowere cyme syndon*' ll.256-7, which means 'it is best to make known quickly whence you are come', the unexceptional formula acting as a metaphorical sword-point to the throat of a suspected enemy. Similarly, in *fit* VIII Beowulf meets Unferð's insinuations not as insults but

as the opening passes of a boasting duel, an oral practice known as flyting. That the combatants bear each other no ill will is shown by Unferð's lending his sword to Beowulf for the mere-fight (ll.1465-72).¹² This belief in the power of words as weapons or actions efficacious in the real world is documented into the twelfth century in England (Ong 1982: 96). However, literate awareness that this view is changing can also be seen, in the Finn lay; the poet tells how the feud will be renewed 'gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnen spræce / ðæs morþor-hetes myndgiend wære / þonne hit sweordes ecg syððan scolde' 'if one of the Frisians by dangerous speech / that murderous hatred should call to mind / then it must needs recall the sword's edge after' (ll.1104-6), explaining rather than just demonstrating the identity between speech and action. This is another sign, though slight, of the increasing 'textuality' of the poem, its emancipation as 'poetry' and the separation of story and life.

An examination of the themes of the poem also shows that this process of separation from the human life-world has begun in *Beowulf*. The feud and *comitatus* structures in the poem support the traditional poetic themes discussed above in the section on formulaic devices. The settings and presentation of these social customs reflect no antiquarian attempts to consistently set the poem in the past (Whitelock 1951: 94), suggesting that poet and audience assume without question that the world of the poem is not separated from their life-world. However, 'textualisation' is apparent here, in that local peculiarities of custom are not reflected in descriptions of hunts, feasts, battles and so on (Whitelock 1951: 93), so that the scenes of the poem inhabit the space of poetic tradition rather than the actual physical space of human life. This seems to explain the presence of the non-epic, fantastical elements of the poem, the monsters and the dragon, which are obviously not part of material existence. But this is not possible for the vocality paradigm; an audience hearing the poem only through performance would be hermeneutically unfit to absorb such a long text unconnected with the extra-linguistic

¹² The figure of Unferð who both symbolises the forces of strife, and exhibits normal social behaviour in his flyting and subsequent assistance of Beowulf, demonstrates Havelock's point that in oral poetry particular characters are not solely heroes or villains, but perform either function as the plot demands it.

context. The space of tradition has to overlap almost completely with the space of everyday life, including the monsters, if the poem is to be received.

In *The Audience of Beowulf* Whitelock has shown that the poem is embedded in the reality of eleventh-century England. She maintains, on varied evidence, that the average Anglo-Saxon of this time would not only have been unable to distinguish between actual history and fantasy such as found in *Beowulf*, but would have felt no need to make such a distinction (1951: 71). Firstly, the English Place Name Society has listed pools named for Grendel or words used to describe him, such as *byrs*, and for the *nikkers* that attack Beowulf as he dives to meet Grendel's dam (Whitelock 1951: 72, 74). Secondly, place names together with textual evidence (the Cotton Gnostic Poem) suggest a belief in the existence of dragons with a habit of inhabiting barrows (Whitelock 1951: 75). These two points suggest that in Anglo-Saxon England the average man believed in monsters, in the creatures of evil lurking in the waste lands around him (Whitelock 1951: 71). Lastly, if the poet and his audience had not thought Grendel real enough, they would not have gone to such trouble to fit him into a Christian world-view, giving him descent from the first murderer (Whitelock 1951: 76). The monster is clearly stated to have a soul (l.1004). The fantastical or folk-tale elements of *Beowulf* would thus appear to be rooted in its audience's life-world.

These elements probably share with the ritual elements of oral poetry origins deep in pre-historical religion. Indeed, epic can be seen as human history interpreted through myth, many elements of which are still evident in *Beowulf*. The location of the monsters in the uninhabited hinterlands of wild darkness, their apparently motiveless attacks against the hall (symbol of civilisation), the deaths of Handscio and Æschere as substitutes for the hero, Beowulf's descent into the mere as the hero's descent into hell, Hroðgar's symbolic appropriation of the slaying of Grendel's dam by his acceptance of the sword-hilt – all these plot elements can be explained if the roots of poetry in ritual and myth as described by Eliade are remembered. Here too, however, evidence of literate influence is apparent. The ritual laments mentioned above are

embedded in the narrative of *Beowulf*, and the word *gid*, which has connotations of formal discourse, is used each time to name them (Hildeburg mourning her son and brother in l.1118a, Hreðel lamenting his son in l.2446b and the Geatish *comitatus* mourning Beowulf in l.3173a), but their ritual words have faded from the tradition. These elements remain satisfying to the audience on a ritual and mythical level, however, and so are retained in the *langue*.

Folklore elements satisfy other needs also, embodying contemporary fears as well as ancient archetypes. The poet and his audience, devoutly Christian people, inhabited a world in which pagan beliefs were still fresh in the communal memory, so the struggle with forces of darkness embodied in the monsters would have been very real to them. They were fairly vulnerable on several other fronts also. Bede's famous image of life as a swallow passing briefly through a warm bright hall on its flight from winter storm to frosty darkness captures the precariousness of Anglo-Saxon life, in which the constant threat of war, civil and foreign (Whitelock 1951:86-8), joined the general hardship attending the life of a people with only fairly primitive agricultural and structural technology. The reality of evil and of suffering, the seemingly hopeless transience of life, found expression in Norse mythology, in which when gods and giants battle on the final day 'the winning side is Chaos and Unreason but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation' (Ker quoted in Tolkien 1936: 21). This is the world in which the *comitatus* system had developed, and *Beowulf* as an attempt to celebrate the old in light of the new reveals the fundamental similarity between this ethic and Christian belief. The rapid absorption of Christianity into the culture of Anglo-Saxon England after Augustine of Canterbury's arrival in 597, and into the poetic tradition that shaped the consciousness of this culture, as *Judith* (which follows *Beowulf* in the Vitellus manuscript) for example shows, is more explicable if this fundamental similarity is understood. This similarity lies in heroism. A hero cannot escape death (in fact, as protector of his people his role is to die) or the arbitrary forces of fate, yet his embracing of this fact allows him to transcend mortality. His is 'absolute resistance, perfect because without hope' (Ker quoted in Tolkien 1936: 21). This is the ethic of bravery. A hero voluntarily accepts danger for his lord and his people, innocent of any guilt

which would make this suffering deserved, because only unmerited suffering can be borne with heroism. This underlies the importance of the blood-feud system by which guilt can be removed. In Christianity these struggles have simply turned inward, with acceptance of mortality now called faith, the battle now spiritual rather than physical, and Jesus the final feud victim who removes guilt. The search for glory that drives the comitatus system is in the end, like the hope of heaven, actually an expression of humankind's longing for the transcendent, one way of living in the world but not of it. As Ong points out, only with literacy can people be separated enough from their context, their life-world, for an inward-orientated understanding of religion such as Christianity to become meaningful (1982: 105). Though in *Beowulf* Christian values are deeply important, as will be explored below, traditional *comitatus* heroism is still the major channel for the poem's exploration of themes of transcendence, suggesting again a poet and audience still profoundly oral.

2.5. Epithetic identification

Both heroic and Christian characteristics are reflected in the poem in the words used to name characters and objects. Ong explains that epithetic identification is important in oral poetry for 'disambiguation' of classes or of individuals, in other words, for clearing the confusion produced by other oral characteristics such as unclear pronominal reference, and fitting characters into their correct place in the context of traditional story, thus enabling the audience to follow the narrative clearly. In Anglo-Saxon as in other Germanic literatures, epithets as such are rare, and their function is taken over by descriptive synonyms. In this area *Beowulf* has a uniquely rich poetic vocabulary.

These synonyms range from simple to highly complex in form. Firstly, there are individual words. This covers several categories: onomastic terms (proper names, historical or fictional), synecdochic terms (such as 'edge' for sword) and other simple metaphors. Secondly, there are compound words. These in Icelandic poetry are called kennings, the term defined as 'a

metaphoric phrase designed to vary in an interesting way the concept for which it stands' (Grose & McKenna 1973: 90). In Anglo-Saxon study, and in this thesis, 'kenning' is used more loosely to refer to any descriptive compound (Grose & McKenna 1973: 90). Finally, there are identifying phrases comprising half- and even full lines.

Onomastic wordplay in Anglo-Saxon is not confined to *Beowulf*, or indeed to poetry. A proclivity for serious etymological word play on names in both the Latin material known to Anglo-Saxon writers and in their own writings has been demonstrated (Robinson quoted in Greenfield 1972: 100). In the poem *Beowulf* himself is a good example: his name, with its connotations of bear-like strength, and lupine ferocity, and its echoes of the many 'Beor's found in Germanic royal houses, is uniquely fitted to a royal hero who meets strange monsters in hand-to-hand combat. Unferð bears a similarly appropriate name; whether the generally accepted translation of his name as 'mar-peace', suggesting the role of close family members in the fall of the Danish dynasty of Heorot, or alternate readings as 'lack-spirit' or ironic 'great-spirit', making him an heroic foil for *Beowulf* (Greenfield 1972: 106) are accepted, the character of Unferð is vividly conjured by his name. These are fictional names in the poem, suggesting that they were carefully created for their connotations. Here again a careful balance between tradition and innovation has to be maintained, or the poem will fail in performance. These invented names are like everyday names, and those belonging to tradition, in that they are compounds of appropriate words. *Hroðgar*, for example, is compound of *hreð* 'glory, fame, honour' (often found in proper names throughout the Germanic tradition) and *gar* 'spear'. In tradition the components of these names have become semantically empty, the compound acting like a formula as a signal of conventionality. The invented names retain metaphorical significance, in the meaning of their constituent words, but through their compound form remain traditional. They also link with another mnemonic feature mentioned by Ong, in that these names are unusual, even bizarre, in their association of inhuman things with people, making them easier to remember (1982: 70). This will be further explored in the next section.

Apart from these fictional names, actual names of historical characters function in oral noetics. The practice of giving the children of a house alliterating names reveals its mnemonic function in lines such as 1.61 ‘*Heorogar, ond Hroðgar ond Halga til*’ where the sons of Healfdene are named. Their nameless sister appears two lines later as Onela’s queen, ‘*Heaðo-Scilfingas heals-gebedda*’, still linked to the family unit by the [h]-alliteration. These are obviously formulaic phrases, aiding the memory of the poet and of the audience, but they reveal also another facet of Anglo-Saxon epithet-substitutes; kennings most often reflect kinship ties and social structures.

An illustrative example is the group of kennings applied to Beowulf, who first appears in the poem as ‘*Higelaces þegn*’ (1.194). Examination of a section of the poem, such as Beowulf’s underwater fight with Grendel’s dam (ll.1492-1625), will reveal the types of term used for the hero, and their relative importance (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Kennings for Beowulf from ll.1492-1625

Type of kenning	Phrase	Lines
Heroic character	<i>feþe-cempa</i> ‘warrior on foot’ <i>hilde-rince</i> ‘war hero’ <i>guð-rinc</i> ‘battle hero’ <i>aglæcan</i> ‘terrifying hero/monster/fiend’ <i>goda</i> ‘good one’ <i>wigena strengest</i> ‘strongest of men’ <i>reþe cempa</i> ‘fierce warrior’	1544a 1495a, 1576a 1501b 1512a 1518a, 1595a 1543b 1585a
Position as leader	<i>Weder-Geata leod</i> ‘leader of the Weather-Geats’ <i>Guð-Geata leod</i> ‘leader of the Battle-Geats’ <i>eorl</i> ‘nobleman’ <i>þeodne</i> ‘prince’ <i>æðelingas</i> ‘noble retainer’ <i>mærne þeoden</i> ‘famous prince’ <i>wine-drihten</i> ‘friend and leader’	1492, 1612b 1538a 1512b 1525a 1596a 1598a 1604b
Kinship status	<i>bearn Ecgþeowes</i> ‘child of Ecgþeow’ <i>mæg Hygelaces</i> ‘kinsman of Hygelac’ <i>sunu Ecgþeowes</i> ‘son of Ecgþeow’ <i>Geata cempa</i> ‘Geatish warrior’ <i>Higelaces ðegn</i> ‘Hygelac’s thegn’	1473b 1530b 1550b 1551b 1574b
Situation in the narrative	<i>gist</i> ‘stranger’ <i>yrre oretta</i> ‘angry warrior’ <i>sele-gyst</i> ‘hall visitor’	1522b 1532a 1545a
Friendship alliances	<i>freca Scyldinga</i> ‘hero of the Danes’	1563b
Role as a prince	<i>hringa þengel</i> ‘prince of rings’	1507a

In this section of little over 130 lines, Beowulf is directly referred to 27 times using kennings. Of these metaphorical synonyms, the majority evoke the values that structure Anglo-Saxon society. Only three kennings lie outside this group, and they are specific to the narrative situation in which Beowulf find himself, for example, '*gist*' to express his recent arrival in the strange underground home of the monsters. The adjective *god*, which is twice used as a noun designating the hero, is at the centre of a complex network of social values. Beowulf is the 'good one' because of his strength and fierceness in battle, that is, his heroic character, and because he is noble, an aristocrat with both illustrious and royal connections. Social virtues less prominent but nonetheless vital to the *comitatus* system are also represented: generosity (the prince as giver of rings), eagerness for fame (prince as famous), kindness (lord as friend) and loyalty (hero serving his host as his lord).

It has been said that 'kennings in Old English poetry are usually relevant to the meaning important at the moment, rather than to overall thematic or structural strategy' (Greenfield 1972: 50), and this is true in *Beowulf* in certain ways. The formula *x-hyrde*, for example, is used for heroes and villains alike, adapted for kings, (*folces hyrd* of Hygelac in l.1832a and *Ongendæow* in l.2981a), for the dragon (*hordes hyrde* l.887a, *beorgas hyrde* l.2304a), for God (*wuldres hyrde* l.931b) and for the Last Survivor (*hringa hyrde* l.2245a). In the passage investigated above, the kenning *wine-drihten*, which has strong connotations of powerful and benevolent protection and is often used for kings and for the Almighty, is used of Beowulf only at the point in the narrative where his band of faithful followers fears he has been killed (l.1604b), and their impending leaderless state strikes home to them. When the hero rises victorious through the water, just as all hope of his return has been lost, he is called *lid-manna helm* 'protector of sea-men' (l.1623b), his function as leader and protector of his troop merging in the moment with the idea of the water surrounding him. That he and his men did arrive by sea makes the term allowable. On two occasions, in ll.1518 and 1538, Beowulf and his adversary are named in the same line, the kennings alliterating, heightening our sense of their confrontation.

On the other hand, kennings are used in patterns spanning the whole narrative to differentiate between characters; for example, *beorn* is used ten times to designate the hero, but never Hroðgar or Hygelac (Wrenn 1973: 224). Here too the social role of the character determines which terms may be used. Several of the descriptive terms used for Hroðgar as king, such as *æpeling ær-god* and *folces hyrde*, are only used of Beowulf when he himself is king. In l.2208 Beowulf becomes king, and in l.2210a is called *eald-epel weard*, a combination of terms used repeatedly for Hroðgar and never before for the hero. Next, in l.2311a, Beowulf is named *sincgifan*, reflecting his new role as controller of wealth. This careful use of kennings could argue a literate poet, but in fact a poetic tradition as central in society as Havelock describes a primary oral tradition to be must be meticulous on matters of social structure if it is to preserve this structure. These kennings serve to teach and reinforce the rights and duties of a ruler. In a heavily oral culture, where identification with the characters of a poem, particularly the hero, is the mode of reception, the association of Beowulf and Hroðgar with the forces structuring society must have a powerful pedagogical effect.

These structuring forces in contemporary Anglo-Saxon society were busy changing to accommodate Christianity, and this process can be traced in the kennings. An interesting remnant of the passing heroic mindset is the kenning *aglæcan*, meaning something terrifying or horrifying, which in the passage investigated above is used of Beowulf but elsewhere in the poem is also applied to Grendel (e.g. l.592a), Sigemund (l.893a) and the dragon (l.2592a). The term carries with it connotations of supernatural qualities (Wrenn 1973: 218), and altogether its suggestion of battle rage inspired and horrifying is that of the tradition of the Scandinavian *beserker* or of the Irish hero Cuchulain, whose one eye swivelled out of his head and whose hair rose straight upward when he attained this state of heroic fury. The kenning *aglæcan* is rare, however, suggesting that the cult of unfettered heroism is passing. Another remnant of this cult in the poem is the preponderance among kennings for inanimate objects of those for swords, armour and to a lesser extent boats, as well as the naming of heroic weapons (in l.2680 for example Beowulf's sword Nægling is named). Many of these words belong to the traditional

poetic vocabulary, showing the roots of oral poetry in the heroic ethic. The presence of Christian kennings, often produced by straight translation from the Latin, shows the adaptation poetry was making as it moved from these roots. Not surprisingly, many of these expressions used as kennings refer to God; Whitelock lists *wuldres wealdend*, *lif-frea*, *Wuldorcyning*, *sigora waldend*, *heofena helm*, and *dæda demend* (1951: 9-10) as examples which are direct translations of Latin terms.

Again, a similarity of idea between Christian and *comitatus* kennings reflects the similarity of the two ethics, and explains the ease of adaptation of the traditional *langue*. From Whitelock's list, for example, *heofona helm* is merely another form of the common formula *x-helm* applied to Beowulf in the passage above (*lid-manna helm*). The many kennings for Hroðgar are mostly linked to his age and function as king, and reflect a mingling of pre- and post-Christian concepts of kingship. Kingship in the *comitatus* ethic is based on blood, fame and valour. A king rules because he is first in all these things, as the descriptive term *ætheling ær-god* 'pre-eminent aristocrat' 1.130 suggests. Hroðgar's descent features in many kennings e.g. *sunu Healfdenes* 'son of Healfdene' 1.645a, as does his fame, e.g. *sige-rof kyning* 'famed victor-king' 1.619b. This fame stems from his mighty youth as his father's general in battle, for which he is still called *brand Healfdenes* 'sword of Healfdene' 1.1020¹³ and *Healfdenes hilde-wisa* 'Healfdene's battle-leader' 1.1064. In the action of the poem, however, he is too old to take part in battles himself; this is partly why Beowulf comes into the plot at all. So Hroðgar's actual physical valour is in the majority of cases referred to obliquely when his role as protector is invoked: e.g. *eodor Scyldingas* 'protector of the Scyldings' 1.424a, *epel-weard* 'guardian of the father-land' 1.616. He may no longer actually fight for his people, but by welcoming and assisting Beowulf Hroðgar is still the shield of his people. This is seen in his symbolic appropriation of Beowulf's deeds, when Hroðgar takes the hilt of the giant sword from Beowulf after the slaying of

¹³ This metaphoric kenning, which is a kind of synecdoche since it describes the king using the symbol, a sword, of one of his functions, that of warrior, shows that characteristic of oral thought described by Havelock as a preference for image over concept (see chapter 1). This supports the manuscript reading '*brand Healfdenes*', rather than the emendation '*bearn Healfdenes*' 'son of Healfdene' (Isaacs in Creed 1980: 223), favoured by some scholars.

Grendel's mother. The poet is aware that some excuse has to be given for Hroðgar's failure to act himself in defence of his people, so as he accepts the hilt he is called 'old' and 'grey-haired' (ll.1677b-8a). Other descriptive terms for Hroðgar reflect his role as controller of wealth e.g. *gold-wine gumena* 'gold-friend of men' l.1476a, 1602a. In addition to being generous, this ideal king is also full of wisdom as well as generous, as the kenning *snottra fengel* 'wise chief' l.1475a shows.

Other Christian kennings are applied to Grendel and the devil, direct translations of those used in the Latin Bible to designate the fiend: *captivus inferni* becomes *helle hæfta*, *hostis antiquus* becomes *ealdgewinna*, and *hostis humani generis* becomes *feond mancynnes* (Whitelock 1951: 11). These terms for the monsters occur side-by-side with other kennings, probably traditional: *atol aglæca* 'terrifying monster' l.732a, for Grendel, and *mere-wif mihtig* 'mighty mere-woman' l.1519a and *brim-wylf* 'sea wolf' l.1506a, 1599a for his mother, for example. Yet other descriptive terms for the monsters incorporate them into the moral and ethical framework of Anglo-Saxon society. In the mere-battle passage examined above, Grendel's mother is referred to as fighting to avenge *hire bearn* 'her child' l.1546b, her *angan eaferan* 'only son' l.1547a, which brings her actions within the compass of the blood-feud system, making her more sympathetic and Beowulf's victory over her, the only way to end the feud, more involving. In a way this also explains why the second fight has to happen. For the first fight to be truly heroic Beowulf's foe has to be as terrifying as possible, so Grendel has to be shown to be a foe both physical and spiritual, of flesh and of soul, which is accomplished as mentioned above by fitting him into the feud system through narrating his mother's revenge. This episode also completes the poem's presentation of the feud system, part of the epic's function as social document.

2.6. Heavy characters

Kennings function at a deep level to reinforce and teach social structures and behaviours, and evidence of the adaptation of these structures to the arrival of Christianity and concomitant

literacy can be traced in the kennings of *Beowulf*. The characters they describe have a similar function and show similar evidence of the changing tradition. Ong explains how, if the actions of the characters of epic are to be memorable, the characters themselves must be memorable, and so the cast of an epic tends to have a larger-than-life quality, to consist of powerful kings, valiant heroes, beautiful queens and terrifying monsters. Characters cease to be so easily memorable if they no longer fit smoothly into these categories, and so these 'heavy' characters also tend to be 'flat' characters. They are also, as Havelock points out, embodiments of the social order, because in epic morals are demonstrated rather than abstractly spelled out. Both poet and audience at the moment of vocal production and reception experience Havelock's *mimesis*, totally subjectively identified with the characters. These heavy characters tend to be aristocrats, exploiting the prominence of this class in society. *Beowulf* shows these oral characteristics clearly, but also signs of literacy: characters showing the beginnings of self-consciousness on the way to being rounded, and objective separation of narrator and characters.

Beowulf is a double type, hero and king. His almost super-human strength sets him above all other men and symbolises his general superiority (ll.196a-8a). He is the ideal hero, mirrored by Wiglaf most fully and also Sigemund and the characters of the Finn lay. Such parallelisms are characteristic of oral noetic processes, and here, as signals of conventionality, link Beowulf with the heroic tradition, giving him credibility as hero which as an invented character he might otherwise lack. In the second part of the poem he is the ideal king, his character as such created with marvellous economy by simply identifying him, through the use of kennings discussed above, with the concept of the ideal king spelled out in Hroðgar. The elision of Beowulf's middle age strengthens this comparison, because the audience has no chance to see his aging process and so automatically identifies him with the only other old king fully presented in the poem. Æschere is a prime example of a heavy character, depicted as an ideal warrior perfect in courage and loyalty (ll.1323b-9b). The women in the poem are all heavy type characters, symbols of civilisation (as explored above) rather than individual persons. The audience is definitely invited to see the characters as embodiments of virtue and social order. The gnomic

phrases inserted approvingly after an action or a speech lead the audience to the lesson (e.g. l.11b). This means that in characterisation at least the poet is still heavily oral; he identifies with his characters completely, and guides the audience to do the same.

Contrast patterns also operate within oral noetics. Grendel stands in obvious opposition to the hero, his deformed humanity casting into high relief Beowulf's superiority. This humanity is created by including the monster in the feud system, as discussed above, and strengthened by linking him with Cain, the first murderer. This link is complexly evocative, because like Cain Grendel is motivated by jealousy; he envies the warmth and splendour of Heorot and the civilisation it represents. The repeated kenning for him, *ellor-gæst* 'spirit from elsewhere,' stresses his alien nature. This suggests a polarity of existence, with human beings blessed by God, as Abel was, and monsters cursed like Cain. This argument has a circularity though, for is Grendel abandoned to evil because he is cursed, or cursed because of his evil? Cain chose not to honour God but then could not escape his punishment. In both figures, perhaps, the mystery of the existence of evil is embodied, not to be explained because inexplicable, but set forth to be included in man's understanding of the world.

Several other homiletic parallels are set up between Beowulf and other characters. Heremod as a promising prince who grows to be an evil ruler is a foil for Beowulf's ideal king (ll.1709-22a). Unferð is the type of the cowardly, treacherous thane, and a foil for Beowulf's ideal hero. Unferð is a complex creation, because though he is a literate invention (as discussed in the previous section) he functions in a highly oral manner, embodying admirable or despicable qualities alternately according to narrative need. In the flyting episode (*fitts* IIX and IX) he is cowardly and treacherous but later he is a worthy warrior who lends his sword Hrunting to Beowulf (*fitt* XXI) and is called *ðyle Hroðgares* 'squire of Hroðgar' l.1456b, *mago Ecglafes / eafopes cræftig* 'son of Ecglaf mighty in strength' ll.1465b-6a, and *wid-cuðne man* 'far-famed man' l.1489b. Unferð could be a conglomeration of traditional characters, the poet presuming that the tradition of shifting characters will make Unferð acceptable to the audience but also

inserting an explanatory aside (ll.1465-72) after the loaning of the sword, where the contrast between the two men is stressed and Unferð's cowardice made the reason he gives up his sword to Beowulf.

This episode also demonstrates another feature of highly oral discourse, namely characters that are imaginatively conscious rather than intellectually self-conscious (Havelock 1963: 198 n.5). Unferð is not aware that he is being inconsistent, though his actions are justified by the narrator. Other examples of instinctive action include Wiglaf's joining of the dragon fight spurred on not by any abstract notion of duty or loyalty but because *'gemunde ða ða are þe he him ær forgeaf'* 'he remembered the kindness that [Beowulf] had bestowed on him' (l.2606). For Wiglaf duty is embodied in his individual lord and their particular relationship, which he explains saying, *'We geheton ussum hlaforde ...þæt we him ða guð-getawa gyldan woldon'* 'we [the Geatish thanes] promised our lord ... that we would repay him for the war-gear [he had given us]' (ll.2654-6). In this case, because this residual oral cast reinforces the *comitatus* system still valid in the tradition and reinforced by the poem, and because these personal memories heighten the impact of the final cataclysmic confrontation of hero and dragon, the poet allows the verbomotor mindset to pass unmodified.

Beowulf in his final speeches shows an interesting combination of literate self-awareness and oral concrete thinking. When he first speaks after the dragon-fight (ll.2729-51) he seems almost to be making an examination of conscience, reckoning his behaviour as warrior and king in preparation for judgement by God. This definitely suggests intellectual self-consciousness able to examine the self objectively, which, as pointed out above, is only possible after the advent of literacy. However, in a strange gesture that sits uneasily with this literate Christian self-awareness, Beowulf asks Wiglaf to bring to him some of the treasures of the hoard, so that, he says, *'ic ðy seft mæge / æfter maððum-welan min alætan, / lif on leodscipe, þone ic longe heold'* 'I more gently may abandon, after winning a wealth of treasure, the life and land that I long have held' (ll.2749b-51). It appears that he needs to experience as he dies some physical proof

of his virtue, and so the reward that waits for him and the glory he has won for his people is embodied in the twisted gold his stiffening fingers yearn to grasp. In light of the vocality of the poem it is not surprising that the behaviour and character of Beowulf are still deeply oral and verbomotor. In inventing Beowulf the poet has drawn on the type of the hero that is part of the *langue*, and it is by placing him in the context of the entire heroic tradition that the audience can accept Beowulf. The tradition is in transition, and so the hero is also.

Hroðgar is clear-cut by comparison; as king his age separates him from the martial side of Germanic kingship, so instead the roles of protector and provider, strongly reminiscent of the Good Shepherd, come to define him. These roles remain within the tradition, as his symbolic appropriation of Beowulf's victories makes clear. Hroðgar definitely still functions within the *comitatus* ethic, offering Beowulf treasure in return for service (ll.384b-5) for example. However, the *comitatus* ethic as embodied in Hroðgar is evidence of how profoundly the tradition has changed to include Christianity. The Danish king sees his enemies in theological terms, calling them *scuccum ond scinnum* 'evil spirits' 1.939a. He understands *wyrd* as the will of God, thanking the Almighty for victory when the monstrous hand of Grendel is nailed to the doorpost of the hall (ll.928-31), and attributing Beowulf's victory to '*Drihtnes miht*' 'God's power' 1.941. In his sermon Hroðgar makes clear that all worldly power comes from God (l.1724b-31), irrespective of a ruler's glory, which is the position taken by Christ before Pilate. The Scylding king understands fame, the other pillar of the heroic ethic, in profoundly Christian terms also. He values fame, saying that Beowulf will live forever because of it (ll.953b-5a) but warns Beowulf not to trust in fame derived from martial success, which is passing (ll.1760b-1a), but to concentrate on being a good and generous king. Hroðgar appears to be the embodiment of the fused Germanic and Christian world-views current in England at the end of the first millennium.

Beowulf is more difficult to understand. Gnostic phrases expressing the traditional Germanic belief in the power of *wyrd* 'Fate' over men are most often found in speeches made by the hero,

but often in close proximity to Christian sentiments. For example, a phrase about fate in 1.572b-3 is followed by Beowulf's statement that Unferð will be damned to hell because of his crimes (1.588b-9a). Beowulf's understanding of heroism is similarly mixed. In the first section of the poem, just before the fight with Grendel, Beowulf states that victory or death is his aim (ll.636b-7), the alliterating formulae '*eorlic ellen, oþðe ende-dæg*' (1.637) expressing the two options revealing their roots in ancient Germanic tradition. Beowulf trusts in his marvellous strength to bring him victory over Grendel, but then says before the fight that God will award victory (1.685b-7), and after the fight that the Lord willed that the monster escape his grasp (1.967b) and that judgement awaits Grendel (1.977b-9). In ll.1386-9 the hero celebrates fame for valour as the best and only aim for men, but precedes this gnomic phrase with another (ll.1384b-5) which motivates the strike against Grendel's dam as vengeance, a reference to the feud system accepted in tenth-century English Christianity. In the second section of the poem a similar variation of understanding can be found. In his final speech before stepping out alone against the dragon, Beowulf upholds the *comitatus* as an efficient way to rule a country, explaining it not in abstract terms but as it was embodied in his own life. In return for treasure and land he served his king well, ever ready in the vanguard of battle, and he shall continue to bear his sword as long as life lasts (ll.2490-8a). His stated motive is given in ll.2512b-15: '*...gyt ic wylle, / frod folces weard, fæhðe secan, / mærdū fremman, gif mec se man-sceaða / of earð-sele ut geseceð!*' '...Yet will I, / aged guardian of the people, the feud seek, / to perform the famous deed, if the evil foe seeks me / out of his cave!' These lines present the feud system, the role of a king as shield for the people, and the *comitatus* ethic that seeks fame above all things and taunts foes. In the remaining lines of the speech (to 1.2537) Beowulf says the battle comes to him because his superior strength gives him the role of the hero, and this time does not hint that God's power assists this strength. After the battle, however, Beowulf's two dying speeches are more Christian. In *fitt* XXXVII he examines his conscience and *fitt* XXXVIII thanks God for allowing him the glory of winning the treasure for his people. Glory is his final thought, because as he dies Beowulf commands the building of a barrow that will remind all who see it of him (ll.2805-8.)

The narrator seems clearer than the hero about the ultimate source of heroic glory, imposing a more thoroughgoing Christianity on him. In ll.670b the narrator comments that Beowulf relies on strength and heaven's grace, and in ll.1270-4a that he trusts in God's strength. Confusion appears to arise in ll.734b-6a when the narrator comments that '*ne wæs þæt wyrd þa*' 'it was not fate that' Grendel should any longer continue his nightly ravages, which seems like a return to the older understanding. However closer examination of the contexts of the word *wyrd* within the poem reveals that for this poet at least it has a meaning closer to 'actual occurrence' than 'fate'. In ll.1056-61 the poet says that Grendel would have slain more of the men in the hall:

1055 *...nefne him witig God **wyrd** forstode
 ond ðæs mannes mod. Metod eallum weold
 gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deð.
 Forþan bið andgit æghwær selest
 ferhðes foreþanc. Fela sceal gebidan*
 1060 *leofes ond laþes, se þe longe her
 on ðyssum win-dagum worolde bruceð.*

'...had not the wise God and one man's might **that fate** prevented. The Lord ruled all mankind, as He still does. So understanding is everywhere best, forethought of soul. Much shall he suffer of weal and woe who lives long in this world in days of sorrow.'

Both God's grace and man's physical valour are necessary for heroic victory. All events, sufferings as well as victories, are part of the inscrutable plan of the Almighty, and so both weal and woe have to be accepted with faith. The tragic melancholy of the old Germanic concept of Fate has simply been transferred to the patient surrender of the Christian concept of faith, as the final gnomic phrase, applicable to either context, shows. The word *wyrd* has been freed of its connotations of effective power behind events, and returned to an earlier meaning, 'the way things are', set against the backdrop of divine omnipotence.

Beowulf's final words are rooted in heroic Germanic tradition. Speaking to Wiglaf he says

2813 *'þu eart ende-laf uses cynnes,
 Wægmunðinga; ealle wyrd forspeon*
 2815 *Mine magas to methodsceafte,
 Eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal'*

'You are the last of our kin, the Wægmunðings; fate has lured to destruction / all my kinsmen, to their destiny, / earls in their valour; I shall after them' (ll.2813-6).

The diction and attitude seem thoroughly traditional, yet the narrator comments immediately after these lines that Beowulf's soul has gone to seek *soð-fæstra dom* (l.2820b), the glory of the

saints. The formula is a direct transposition of the patristic *justorum judicium* (Wrenn 1973: 272). The *wyrd* which sends men to their death is the mysterious pattern of God's will; the mighty forebears whom Beowulf seeks to follow are fused with the victorious saints; the destiny of all men, *metod-sceaft*, death, is subsumed under the power of the *Metod*, God. The *comitatus* concepts of loyalty and valour have become Christianised, but fame remains. This is not a remnant of pagan religion but rather of oral noetics. Only famous men get into epics, and only epics become part of cultural consciousness, so in the fame of heroes the new religion lives.

2.7. Cultivation of praise and vituperation / agonistic tone

Fame grows out of the opposites of praise and vituperation, which Ong describes as characteristic of oral thought and discourse. Oral noetics tend always to be agonistic, to separate all things into polarised opposites. This tendency has roots obviously in the nature of spoken discourse itself (all performative utterances are polemic; Shapiro 1989: 15) and explains why oral cultures are verbomotor. The boasting, challenging and flyting in *Beowulf* are evidence of this tendency. On another level, however, this agonistic pattern of oral noetics is carried into metaphor in the poem, in two sets of opposite symbolism that run through the narrative.

On the one side are light, warmth, sun, hall, fellowship and music, on the other dark, cold, shadow, moor/mere, solitary exile and silence. This arrangement of metaphorical tropes is very ancient and occupies a central position in the Germanic tradition, intimately connected with the poetic attempt to understand the human condition. Bede's startlingly beautiful simile of the bird winging swiftly through the fire-lit hall epitomises this tradition. Heorot, the centre of civilisation in the poem, is roofed with gold, and is seldom mentioned without some reference to its brightness. One such reference suggests a straightforward allegorical significance to this light; the hall stands '*lixta se leoma ofer landa fela*' 'shining its light over many lands' (l.311). It is a symbol of civilisation and of the aristocratic power structure that guarantees civilisation for the Anglo-Saxons. In contrast, Grendel, who embodies all the forces of chaos and barbarism

that threaten this civilisation, is first introduced as *'se ellen-gæst...se þe in þystrum bad'* 'the mighty spirit...who dwelt in darkness (ll.86a-7b). The kennings for the monsters, as discussed above, also associate them firmly with evil in the new Christian world-view.

The binary imagery is used in the poem then as metaphorical pointing for moral and ethical teaching. For example, sunlight is always associated with good. One instance of this imagery, the arrival of the Geats (*fitt III*), demonstrates how the symbolism is used to teach the old heroic code. The Geats' errand of valour epitomises the old heroic ethic, and so images of brightness pervade the descriptions of the men themselves and of the scenery: *'beorhte frætwe'* 'bright ornaments' (l.214b), *'brim-clifu blican'* 'shining sea-cliffs' (l.222a). Another cluster of bright images is found in one of Beowulf's gnomic sayings in ll.603a-6b. It is the evening before the first fight and the hero has just affirmed his belief that God will decide to whom victory will fall; Beowulf reinforces this by saying:

*'Gæþ eft se þe mot
to medo modig, siþþan morgen-leoht
605 ofer ylða bearn opres dogores,
sunne swegl-wered suþan scineð!'*

Go again who may courageous to mead, when the morning light of another day, the sun clothed with radiance, shines from the south over the children of men!

The day, the sun, morning light and the warmth of the south, together with other positive imagery, the feasting in the mead-hall, are all associated here with life and victory. This is consonant with the old heroic ethic, but closer examination reveals how the ethic and the imagery have adsorbed themselves onto the new Christian faith; the *swegl-wered* of l.606 is derived from the Latin *amictus lumine* of Ps.CIII v.2 of the Vulgate (Wrenn 1973: 274). Agonistic imagery, like other traditional features, functions as an adaptive mechanism.

The hall is the site of feasting, which draws together the images of fellowship, light, warmth and music. From this cluster several other parallel structures of imagery are derived. One of these often used in the poem is the feasting-lamentation polarity. From the first building of Heorot the happy feasting it was intended to house is contrasted with the deserted silence and the wailing

of mourners brought about by Grendel. This contrast is encapsulated in a formulaic line, '*þa wæs æfter wiste wop up ahafen*' 'after feasting arose lamentation' (l.128), which demonstrates how profoundly this imagery is embedded in the tradition. The monster is even referred to during this period as the hall-thane (l.142a), carrying the polarity wider to encompass Hroðgar as good power, symbol of order, and the monster as evil power, symbol of chaos.

This connects the feasting-lamentation polarity with another parallel structure contrasting *comitatus* and exile. Foucault has shown how the configuration of social space shifts from age to age, and how the meanings and values of different locations in this space change with it. The Middle Ages saw the world as a hierarchic assemblage of places, sacred and profane, protected and exposed, urban and rural places, 'legitimated within a cosmology that naturalised this ordering of places' (Shapiro 1989: 24). This dichotomy is used in the poem, with the hall the centre of sacred, protected, urban space, and the fens the epitome of profane, exposed, rural space. The monsters are referred to as fen-dwellers (e.g. ll.103b-4a introduces Grendel as '*se þe moras heold, / fen ond fæsten*' 'he who holds the moors, the fen and fastness') and all the associations of inhospitable wildness become attached to the monsters themselves. The monsters are repeatedly described as solitary, in contrast to the humans who live in community. The high proportion of kennings for king and hero which refer to their positions as part of society (as discussed above) highlights this. Again, this *comitatus*-exile imagery is deeply embedded in Germanic tradition but also used to adapt to Christianity. The imagery functions ambiguously in the famous Anglo-Saxon elegies (*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* for example) to explore physical and spiritual exile.

In *Beowulf* exile is the ultimate disaster. Prophesying the end of the Geats which will follow Beowulf's death, Wiglaf says:

2885 '*...Nu sceal sinc-þego ond swyrd-gifu*
eall eðel-wyn eowrum cynne,
lufen alicgean; lond-rihtes mot
þære mæg-burge monna æghwylc
idel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas

2290 *feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
dom-leasan dæd. Deað bið sella
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwit-lif'* (ll.2884-91)

Now shall receiving of treasure and giving of swords, all joy in inherited estate, the loved home, be given up by your people; each man of your kinsmen shall wander, without land-rights, after noblemen from afar hear of your flight, the inglorious deed. Death is better for all earls than a life of reproach!

The death of the king, the centre of power, and the failure of the aristocracy to uphold the *comitatus* ethic leave the structure of civilisation crumbling; the men will lose their land and become homeless exiles unwelcome everywhere because of their cowardice. This exile imagery builds up through the course of the poem and reaches climactic power in the second part, where in quick succession the 'Lay of the Last Survivor', descriptions of Hygelac's disastrous Frisian raid, King Hreþel's sorrow and the death and funeral of Beowulf all draw on images of death, exile and silence.

Agonistic imagery encompasses weather and nature in the poem, and descriptions of either are used for their emotional connotations. For example Grendel's ravages cause Heorot to stand desolate for '*twelf wintra tid*' 'twelve winters' time' (l.147), the associations of cold barrenness that come with winter admirably suiting the condition of the mead-hall. Animals function as signals of conventionality, as when the aristocratic hunting hawk forms part of a complex of imagery symbolising the culture lamented by the Last Survivor (l.2264b). In a passage that manages in less than seven lines to express the desperate bravery and grief of an army's last stand the Geatish herald foretells his people's end:

3021 *...Forðon sceall gar wasan
monig morgen-ceald mundum bewunden,
hæfen on handa, nalles hearpan sweg
wigend weccean, ac se wonne hrefn*
3025 *fus ofer fægum fela reordian,
earne secgan, hu him æt æte speow,
þenden he wið wulf wæl reafode.* (ll.3021b-7)

Then shall many a spear cold in the morning be wound in the fingers, raised by the hands; the sound of the harp shall not waken the warriors, but the dark raven, eager over the fallen, shall speak much, tell the eagle how he at eating sped, when he with the wolf plundered the slain.

The terrified grip of the warriors' hands on their spears in the moments before battle evokes for the listener the courage of the heroic ethic, for these men know they are *fæge* 'those doomed to

die' (l.3025a), and that *wyrd* is inescapable. All the force of tragic Germanic tradition is mustered in these lines, culminating in the presence of the Beasts of Battle, the raven, eagle and wolf well-known in oral poetry, who channel to this scene all the tragic glory of all other battles in all the other heroic poems of the tradition. A particular Anglo-Saxon detail is the reference to the cold hour just before dawn, which in this tradition has strong associations with doom and dread, of 'terror without solace' (Greenfield 1972: 37). Landscape is also used to create mood. The monster's mere is associated with shadows, clouds, darkness, stormy winds and weeping skies (ll.1357b-76a). The disturbance of the water metaphorically mirrors the disturbance of society; the water boils blood-stained as the warriors find *Æschere's* head on the bank (ll.1420b-1), and again as Beowulf battles the she-monster (ll.1630b), but after he surfaces victorious the waves finally come to stillness. The dragon's barrow too is described as standing near troubled waters '*holm-wylme neh / yð-gewinne*' 'the surging of the billows, the strife of the waves' ll.2411b-2a. The presentation of nature in *Beowulf*, as in other heroic poetry (Finnegan 1970: 137), is subsumed into the agonistic economy, and its naturally polarised character, summer and winter, day and night, lushness and desolation, is fused with the polar opposites of praise and vituperation, heroism and cowardice, right and wrong.

The imagery explored so far is traditional, part of the communal *langue* and as such powerful in connecting the poem to the wider extra-linguistic context. The poet also adapts particular images to resonate within the poem with particular significance for its theme of change and loss. The song sung by the character who is a particularly poignant embodiment of this theme, the Last Survivor, contains several of these thematic images. The 'Lay of the Last Survivor,' as it is known, is found in ll.2247-66, and the relevant section is ll.2252b-66:

...nah, hwa sweord wege
 oððe feormie fæted wæge,
 drync-fæt deore; duguð ellor scoc.
 2255 *Sceal se hearda helm, hyrsted golde*
fætum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
þa ðe beado-griman bywan sceoldon;
ge swylce seo here-pad, sio æt hilde gebad
ofer borda gebræc bite irena,
 2260 *brosnað æfter beorne; ne mæg byrnan hring*

*æfter wig-fruman wide feran
 hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
 gomen gleo-beames, ne god hafoc
 geond sæl swingeð, ne se swifta mearh
 2265 burh-stede beateð. Bealo-cwealm hafað
 fela feorh-cynna forð onsended!*

...there is none to wave the sword or polish the plated vessel, the precious flagon; the old warriors have elsewhere departed. Now shall the hard helm, adorned with gold, be stripped of its plates; the polishers sleep who the battle-masks should prepare; also the coat of mail, that which in battle endured over the shattering of shields the bite of swords, decays after the warriors; nor may the mail-coat travel far with the battle-chiefs, at the side of heroes. There is no joy of the harp, delight of the lyre, nor does the good hawk sweep through the hall, nor the swift steed trample the courtyard. Evil death has many races of men sent away.

The imagery falls into two groups: hall objects (flagon, harp, hawk) and war objects (sword, helm, mail-coat, shield, horse). Both groups are associated with community, with the brightness of treasure, and fall into the wider group of traditional positive images. Though in the context of this passage both groups symbolise civilisation, over the course of the poem as a whole they develop unique specialised meanings.

Of the hall objects, the flagon is given prominence in the course of the poem; as in the Royal Woman mini-theme, it is presented here with a cluster of concepts revolving around the destruction of civilisation. A golden drinking vessel seems in the poem to be an index symbol, a synecdoche for the whole group of images symbolising civilisation. This explains why though the thief takes only a flagon from the dragon's hoard this theft ultimately brings about the end of the Geatish people; the theft is allegorical of the upsetting of the delicate balance of civilisation.

The war objects show specialisation both as a group and individually. The group itself symbolises victory, loyalty and fame, the part of civilisation dependent on the *comitatus* ethic. Wiglaf says Beowulf shall not suffer alone, but that '*urum sceal sweord ond helm, / byrne ond beadu-scrud bam gemæne*' 'both shall share sword and helm, mail-shirt and corselet' (ll.2659b-60). These items symbolise fealty, which Wiglaf owes to his lord, but also glory, for the young warrior will share the victory. Individually, mail-coats and the sound of their jingling are distinguished as associated with heroism. As the Geats arrive, '*syrca hrysedon, / guð-gewædo*'

‘mail-shirts rattled, the battle garments’ (ll226b-7a). The Danish coast-guard hails them as ‘*searo-hæbbendra, / byrnum werede*’ ‘warriors, / mail-shirt wearers’ (ll.236b-7a). *Searo-hæbbendra*, which literally means ‘owner of armour’, is a common poetic metaphor for a warrior; it reflects the prerequisite wealth of a man of the warrior class in Anglo-Saxon England. The reference to mail-coats is more pointed, a particular emphasis by the author of the poem. Beowulf is associated with the presence of coat-mail, its shine and sound¹⁴. As he approaches the throne of Heorot he is described; ‘*on him byrne scan, / searo-net seowed smiþes orþancum*’ ‘on him his mail-shirt shone, the corselet linked together by the craft of smiths’ (ll.405b-6). This combination of the symbols of light and mail, of civilisation and heroism, is particularly appropriate for the hero. The symbol of friendship between Danes and Geats is the heirloom mail-shirt Hroðgar sends to Hygelac (*fitt XXXI*).

Within both the context of the poem and the wider context of tradition, these agonistic groups of imagery are adapted to Christianity, particularly the contrasting pairs of light/dark and fellowship/exile. Traditional imagery is recuperated as Christianised symbol. The hall and war objects seem to stand outside this process, rooted only in the Germanic tradition. Treasure is nowhere presented as an allegory of treasure in heaven. This too can be traced to the poem’s vocalicity, its rootedness in the tone of tragic darkness peculiar to Germanic tradition. ‘Love of treasure and honour cannot be decried by the poet because without it there would be no tragedy in the idea of the transience of such things’ (Grose & McKenna 1973: 72). Light and life exist but to pass, and so a cloud of mortality ever shadows the glorious day of a hero’s victory. The treasure which symbolises joy in the hall and splendour in battle is burned on the hero’s pyre and passes away, useless to men, just as the tradition itself is withering before the creeping flame of Christianity and the literacy it brings. The poet values these things paradoxically as symbols of both the dying old ways and the rising new beliefs, and in this tension humanity’s tragedy is fully experienced and yet survived.

¹⁴ This metonymic identification of a character with an object is also an oral trait. Ancient examples include Zeus with a thunderbolt, and modern remnants the Virgin Mary with a lily. These symbolic objects function like epithets, for disambiguation.

2.8. Copiousness

The many parallel pairs of symbolic tropes and the repeated references to them throughout the poem are necessary because of vocality. Repeated presentation of the traditional images strengthens the poem's position within the extra-linguistic context, making it more meaningful for the audience. Repeated use of the adapted images is necessary if the audience are to realise the adaptation and generate for themselves the new meanings by comparison with the cultural norm. The use of imagery in the poem illustrates the last oral noetic characteristic, redundancy or *copia*. In a primary oral society something to be remembered has to be kept present between the two people conversing about it, and so it has to be repeated over and over. This repetition can be of words or phrases or plot sections, and varies from exact repetition of formulae to general repetition of concept clusters. This repetition sets up a norm, a background texture or standard which the audience accepts. Redundancy is accepted and the unexpected avoided. The audience instinctively compensates for any slight mistake that varies from this standard, but any really new or surprising thought or phrase becomes highly effective (Russo 1994: 376-7, 384).

Classical Anglo-Saxon is a language particularly rich in synonyms, and Anglo-Saxon alliterative metrics are particularly suited to parallelisms, so the poetry shows *copia* on many levels. A common term used is variation, defined by Arthur Brodeur as 'a double or multiple statement of the same concept or idea in different words, with a more or less perceptible shift in stress' (Greenfield 1972: 64). Some scholars hold that variations have to be grammatically parallel in some way, maintaining that only so will they be recognisable by reader or listener (Greenfield 1972: 64). Others focus on variation of kennings. I will use the term more loosely to refer to the repetition of an idea or concept, because, particularly in traditional themes or when dealing with traditional ideas such as kinship or political structure, variation of the idea is the vital core of this rhetorical device. The effect *copia* produces is a profoundly textured and engrossing picture of the world. 'In the best Old English poetry this parallelism is not merely the plain restatement of an idea. The poet uses it to emphasise, specialise or generalise, or to

enrich his audience's understanding of what he is trying to convey' (Grose & McKenna 1973: 59). This section will examine in *Beowulf* three levels of variation: firstly words in strict grammatical parallelism, secondly kennings, and lastly non-formulaic extension, and determine the degree to which they show simple oral accumulation on the one hand and literate adaptation on the other.

Variation on the first two levels is illustrated in the passage telling of the gift of the Necklace of the Brosings to Beowulf, described in ll.1192-200a:

- 1192 *Him wæs ful[†] boren ond freond-lapu
wordum bewægned, ond wunden gold
estum geeawed, earm-reade* twa*
1195 *hrægl[†] ond hringas, heals-beaga* mæst
þara þe ic on foldan gefrægn hæbbe.
Nænigne ic under swegl selran hyrde
hord-maððum hæleþa, syþðan Hama ætwæg*
to þere byrhtan byrig Brosinga mene,*
1200 *sigle ond sinc-fæt...*

To him was the flagon[†] borne and a gracious invitation with words offered, and twisted gold kindly presented, two arm ornaments*, corselet[†] and rings, greatest of collars* of those which I have heard of on earth. Nor have I heard of a better treasure-hoard of heroes under the sky since Hama carried away* to the bright citadel the necklace of the Brosings, jewel and costly vessel...

(An asterisk marks a word unique to the poem, and a cross a synecdoche.)

Phrases are varied in ll.1192-4b and words throughout the passage in two overlapping systems; in the first *wunden gold* l.1193 can apply equally to *ful* l.1192 or the gifts in ll.1194-5, though the term is more usually applied in the poem to jewellery. In the second the greatest of necklaces called by a variety of synonyms, *heals-geaga mæst* l.1195b, *Brosinga mene* l.1199b and *sigle ond sinc-fæt* l.1200a. The overlap occurs where *heals-geaga mæst* forms part of the list of jewellery that varies the *wunden gold*.

The three phrases *ful boren*, *freond-lapu wordum bewægned* and *wunden gold estum geeawed* all have the same structure, object + past participle, and all apply to the same subject and predicate, namely *him wæs* in the opening line of the passage. These phrases all convey the same idea, namely the proper social treatment of a hero. Offering the mead-cup, speaking words of friendship and giving material rewards for heroism all signify society's endorsement of the

heroic code, appropriate both in the world of the poem of the audience. This system of variation therefore embeds the passage firmly at the birth of *parole* out of *langue*.

Other oral characteristics of the passage include formulae (ll.1196-7 and half-lines ll.1195a and 1200a are common in descriptions of gifts or deeds) and unclear reference (*wunden gold*). The narrative shift from the giving of the gifts to the history of the Necklace, brought on presumably by its introduction into the story and marked by two formulae almost identical in meaning (ll.1195-7), is characteristic of the episodic flow of oral narrative and the aggregative cast of oral thought. On the level of diction the use of the adjective *ful* as a synecdoche to mean a flagon full of mead, and of the noun *hrægl* (literally 'dress') to signify the corselet, is also traditional.

One traditional element seems to be problematic. The formula *sigle on sinc-fæt* used to vary *Brosinga mene* in the previous line is inappropriate, since *sinc-fæt* usually means 'drinking cup'. Postulating a forgiving audience could perhaps explain this, for they, busy enjoying the *copia* presenting this splendid scene, would presumably allow this small infelicity to pass. Lord insists, however, that formulae are never empty repetitions or meaningless slogans but always have meaning (1987: 57). Perhaps the phrase functions, then, more to suggest an overall meaning of 'objects costly and aristocratic', which is quite appropriate for both the legendary Necklace of the Brosings and for the narrative situation in *Beowulf*. If this is the case the term is important as a signal of conventionality rather than a carrier of literal meaning.

Into this largely subconscious traditional background the poet builds three words unique to the poem, *earm-reade* l.1194b, *heals-beaga* l.1195b and *æt wæg* l.1198b. Though the limited surviving Anglo-Saxon corpus makes an absolute statement on this matter impossible, the exceptional richness of unique words and compounds in *Beowulf* suggests that these asterisked terms could be terms new-forged for the occasion, examples of the poet's fertility of invention. The verb *æt wegan* 'to carry away' is a combination of *æt* 'from' and *wegan* 'to carry', which

exactly suits the action (Hama carrying the necklace from the citadel). In contrast to the generally colourless use of verbs in tradition and in the poem (noted above) this vividly visual verb in a stressed position is slightly unusual. The compounds are vivid visual synonyms, *earm-reade* in l.1194b for bracelet, and *heals-beaga* in l.1195b for collar or necklace. This second compound seems formed to alliterate with the formulaic *hrægl ond hringas* in the first half of l.1195. The Brosing's Necklace has to be mentioned at some stage, for the poet needs it to introduce for the first time Hygelac's Frisian raid (ll.1200b-14b), an important motif in the second half of the poem. However, use of the formula *hrægl ond hringas* (which forces the neologism) seems unnecessary, since it refers to generic rather than particular gifts and could have been replaced with an alternative suited to an existing word for necklace. One element of this formula, the synecdoche *hrægl*, seems important enough to be picked up again in the queen's speech directly after this passage; she urges Beowulf to enjoy the 'beages' necklace l.1215a and use the 'hrægles' corselet l.1216b. *Hrægl* and *beaga* seem to belong together. One possible explanation for this, which would explain the mentioning of corselet and necklace in one line, if not the exact words used to do so, would be if these two objects were traditionally associated. However, repeated mention of both necklaces and corselets separately in the poem, and the lack of any tradition of a corselet accompanying the Necklace of the Brosings in either other Germanic legends or subsequent references in the poem, make this solution unlikely. The other possibility is that the poet, realising that injudicious use of a formula has forced a possibly confusing neologism in l.1195b, decides that the exact identity of the 'collar' to which he is referring needs to be clarified, and for this purpose uses two traditional oral techniques: the digressive history in ll.1197-201 and the variation on necklace, explored above. This, it may be argued, is not beyond the skill of a talented oral poet, but the deliberate introduction of the corselet, using the same h-alliteration, into Wealhðeow's speech, suggests the care and revision of a poet still in the oral tradition but able to revise his work.

These lines demonstrate various functions of variation: satisfying alliterative necessity, reinforcing themes, creating mood and enhancing aesthetic pleasure. These are only some of the

functions of this device (Greenfield 1972: 83). Often it is used to make the narrative more visual and vivid, as do the varying prepositional phrases in ll.210b-1a '*flota wæs on yðum, / bat under beorge*' 'the ship was on the waves, the boat under the cliff', which show movement, the changing perception of Beowulf and his men as they come down from the cliffs towards the boat to embark for Denmark (Greenfield 1972: 63). Similarly when the warriors push the dead dragon over the cliff, they '*leton weg niman, / flod fæðmian frætwa hyrde*' 'let the wave take, the flood embrace the guardian of treasures' (ll.3131b-3); the varying phrases suggest consecutive actions as the monster is pulled deeper out to sea (Greenfield 1972: 65). This visual element is characteristic of oral discourse (Havelock 1963: 180). Variation can also contribute to the overall function of epic as Havelock describes it, to reinforce knowledge and social structure. In ll.2333-5a all the designations of land that make up a kingdom, namely the citadel, the coastland and the countryside, are included in a variation system describing the areas devastated by the dragon. The stylistic device hides a unit of communal lore.

In practice the shift in stress, this flashing of another facet with each variation of an idea, can make it difficult to tell whether the repetition is truly restating the concept or rather enumerating related instances or progressing to related ideas (Greenfield 1972: 64). A Homeric scholar, J. Russo has developed a concept he calls non-formulaic orality, or 'Item Plus', which is particularly useful here, making a virtue of the necessity of including these related types of variation. In Homer, Russo identifies three types of variation, or as he calls it, extension: *appositional* extension, which is 'item + slightly different aspect of the same'; *explanatory* extension, which is 'item + aspect that significantly widens its reference or image'; and *metonymic* extension, which is 'item + expansion that serves as a natural bridge to the next (closely related) idea' (Russo 1994: 374). At its best, this type of *copia* functions like the epic simile, helping to create 'that ample background scene and that sense of a whole world which are so necessary to the manifold life of the epic' (Wallerstein quoted in Greenfield 1972: 83).

The functioning of extension in the poem can be understood by examining its occurrence in three passages, chosen for their position in the poem and their subject matter. The history of the Geatish royal house is told at the beginning of the poem as an introduction to the building of Heorot and the angering of Grendel. Hroðgar's sermon is found in the centre of the poem, towards the end of the first part, and consists of a long homily on the virtue of generosity. Beowulf's funeral is the final passage of the poem. Extension can be examined for type, but also for function, according to whether the device clarifies a concept related to social structure (which, according to Havelock, is the actual subject-matter of epic), or merely functions to carry the narrative forward. The results can be seen in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: The nature and function of extensions in three passages from *Beowulf*

Type of extension	Hroðgar's history ll.50b-85 (35 lines)		Hroðgar's sermon ll.1700-84 (85 lines)		Beowulf's funeral ll.3137-82 (46 lines)	
	Social structure	Narrative	Social structure	Narrative	Social structure	Narrative
Appositional	51-3 62-3 68-9		1704-5 1710 1713-4 1716-7 1732-3 1751-2 1754-5 1756-7 1758-9 1776 1798-9	1711-12	3169-70	3141-2 3144-5 3150-1 3157-8
Explanatory	54-5 57-8 64-5 68-9 78-9 81-2	74-6	1730-1 1741-2 1750-2 1759-60 1771-2	1721-2	3175-6 3178-9	3153-4 3163-5
Metonymic	64-5 80-1	53-4 82-3	1707-9 1779-80		3181-2 (?)	3166-7 3181-2 (?)
Total	14 (<1 every 2 lines)		20 (<1 every 4 lines)		11 (<1 every 4 lines)	

Immediately noticeable is that the History passage has an incidence of extensions almost double that of the other two passages. Though at 35 lines the History is also the shortest passage, it has the highest number of explanatory extensions (half of those found in the passage). Whitelock has pointed out that the more oblique presentation of Danish history in the first part of the poem, as compared to the fuller (though wildly episodic) presentation of Geatish history in the

second part, can have several reasons: either the poet was more confident of his audience's knowledge of Danish than of Geatish history, or he only had at his disposal a tradition of appropriate formulae which told of Danish history (1951: 55). The concentration of explanatory extensions in this section, however, suggests that a combination of both these reasons is perhaps more accurate; with formulae enough at his disposal but with their source tradition fading the poet builds into his introduction a layered presentation of the history of Hroðgar and his people, so that his audience are reminded and reminded again of the history beginning to seem remote to them. This passage also has the highest incidence of metonymic extensions, suggesting the oral noetic thought process which moves gradually from linked thought to linked thought. With the Sermon it has a low incidence of narrative extensions. The poet is setting his scene, rather than narrating any significant action.

The Sermon passage, approximately twice as long as the other two, presents a different pattern. Firstly, the incidence of extensions is half that of the History passage, and though it has more extensions in total it has fewer explanatory and metonymic examples than the first passage. This weights the balance strongly towards appositional extensions. In the light of Whitelock's argument that this poem is intended for a sophisticated Christian audience (1951: 5) this is not surprising; the Sermon treats of the Christianised virtue of generosity in the context of the *comitatus* ethic, both of which were perfectly familiar to the intended audience. Rather than explaining genealogies dissolving from communal memory the poet is exploring a current ethical issue, which he presents in traditional Anglo-Saxon fashion from every possible angle. As with the History passage, the situation is informative rather than narrative, so only two extensions could possibly be classed as advancing the story.

The Funeral passage, midway in length of the three, provides an illuminating contrast to the other two passages. Unlike the others, this passage shows a preponderance of narrative extensions overall, more than three quarters of its total. This is perhaps because this section describes an occurrence rather than discussing history or theology. The passage also shows a

more balanced profile, with five appositional and four explanatory extensions (metonymic as with the other passages are in the minority). As discussed above the funeral theme is both profoundly traditional, rooted in ancient ritual, and also central to the more literate theme of the poem, the transience of human civilisation. The details of such a funeral were probably not known first-hand by the audience (Whitelock 1951: 85), but the presence of the funeral theme in tradition would mean that the poet, introducing it for the sake of his overall message, could both draw on a rich store of powerful formulae deeply rooted in the consciousness of his culture, and angle or explore this tradition according to his purpose. The profile of extensions in this passage reflects this, both presenting and examining traditional terms and situations.

The leisurely presentation of the matter of the poem is another function of *copia*, particularly important in oral presentation. An audience functioning in the paradigm of vocalicity is for purely practical reasons limited as to the number of hermeneutic operations they can perform on the tale they are hearing, except when, because repeated and profoundly part of their long-term memories, the traditional parts of the tale are more available for hermeneutic investigation (Parks in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 54). It is precisely the evolutionary nature of oral poetry, adapting to new demands, that requires this hermeneutic investigation by the audience, and makes *copia* necessary. This concept also throws light on the passages examined above, since the History passage, the most important of the three for understanding the action of the poem but also increasingly the most remote, provides by its concentration of extensions the most time for assimilation.

This need for time to think perhaps explains the last and broadest kind of *copia* found in the poem, which is repetition of action. The most obvious example of this is Beowulf's recapitulation to Hygelac of the Danish episodes forming the first part of the poem (ll.2000-2162). An audience functioning in the paradigm of vocalicity, for whom *Beowulf* would already be familiar in so many ways because of its rootedness in the poetic tradition, would surely not need such a lengthy memory-aid, so the reason for this repetition cannot be mnemonic

necessity. Some scholars have explained it as proof of the fusion of alternate versions of the tale (notably Magoun 1953), but the most probable explanation is Whitelock's, that this structure is intended to allow a three-part telling of the tale (1951: 20). Particularly in light of the poet's adaptation of certain traditional features, such as imagery, this recapitulation would be necessary at the beginning of a performance of the second section of the tale, to recreate for the audience the particular context of this poem within the broader context of the tradition. On a smaller scale the short repetition in *fit* XIX of the Grendel fight, told just as Grendel's dam approaches the hall to wreak revenge on the heroes, functions similarly. This repetition reminds the audience why she is there, both to keep the story plausible and to strengthen the ethical structure in which the tale exists.

Copia is thus important in the social and didactic function of epic, as described by Havelock. A final, and not least important, attribute given to epic poetry by this last characteristic of oral noetics is the formal dignity and ponderous inclusiveness of tone produced by the need to repeat, particularly in poetry produced by a culture so fond of synonyms and given to 'the incrustation of ideas around single objects' (Wimsatt quoted in Greenfield 1972: 61) as the Anglo-Saxons of tenth-century England.

2.9. Conclusion

From this discussion of *Beowulf* a few of the functions of epic in a transitionally vocal society can be described. These functions are educational, mystical, political, aesthetic and adaptive. Though *Beowulf* shows many signs of literate influence, on many levels it still functions as Havelock describes. Of all the oral noetic characteristics listed by Ong the poem shows most clearly firstly the standardisation of themes to the human life-world of a verbomotor culture. Its episodes are 'plucked from a background of story, a cultural communal competence' (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 99). Also, as performance the discourse is polemic (Shapiro 1989: 15), its very existence dependent on and endorsed by the tradition, the *langue*, shared by poet

and audience. Though influenced by literate Christianity the poetic discourse as performed epic is therefore still very powerful in the consciousness of each person involved in its performance, forming the self to the order, not the order to the self (Shapiro 1989: 19). Aristotle, and after him Georgias, found the purpose of poetry in a pleasure teleology, but this is evidence of how literate their society had become. Oral poetry is more homeostatic and fundamental in function. This is why the most obvious function of *Beowulf* is educational, representing and endorsing the systems structuring society, the systems upholding the authority of the aristocratic warrior class. The poem's vocality links this authority with the profound mythical frameworks of human consciousness, still stemming from the roots of poetry in ritual. As epic *Beowulf* is without irony on any significant scale, because existing in and for the system it cannot undermine the system, and because rooted in myth it is not self-conscious or self-reflexive but takes itself at face value.

Aristotle writes that tragedy supersedes epic because it performs more efficiently the function of poetry, which is the arousal of pity and terror. The magical or ritual roots of oral drama, postulated to have developed from charm through boast to epic (Opland 1983: 138), suggest that this catharsis originally had mystical significance. That epic no longer fulfilled this need in Aristotle's time is indicative of how far his society had travelled from these roots. The society in which *Beowulf* was performed had also moved beyond its original pre-literate state, yet in it heroic poetry still retained remnants of this mystical function. The time frame of *Beowulf* is mythical and archetypal. The laments embedded in the poem are remnants of oral ritual. The abandonment of the hall caused by Grendel's attacks suggests the dissolution of social forms into orgiastic chaos that was part of pre-literate regeneration rituals (Eliade 1954: 69). Beowulf's death at the end of the poem satisfies the mythical need for a sacrificial death.¹⁵ Poet and audience form a 'group', to use Neumann's term, bound together by emotional forces founded in common experience, its members sharing with each other a *participation mystique*.

¹⁵ The poet chooses the actual death of the hero rather than the substitution sacrifice of Wiglaf for Beowulf, which Patroclus bears for Achilles and Enkidu for Gilgamesh.

Though the poet serves 'as the instrument or vessel of celebration, each individual contributes actively to the collective function in a traditional performance' (Foley 1974: 203). In the verbomotor culture bard and hero become one at some level, because words are actions.

In the mystical function of primary oral epic lie the roots of the genres' claim to magisterial authority, to ownership of truth, described by Havelock. Epic is a particular configuration of social space (Shapiro 1989: 24), where a synthesis of passing tradition and rising Christian ethic can be achieved. This synthesis 'brings the conflict between old and new, myth and history, fantasy and empiricism, out into the open and allows the purely heroic, dramatic, and ethically exemplary elements to be contemplated and valued' (Kellogg in Doane & Pasternack 1992: 95). In the politically unsettled society of Anglo-Saxon England this function would be vital in adapting traditional social systems to changing culture and developing national identity. All national epics after Virgil demonstrate epic's function in creating identity (Newman in Preminger & Brogan 1993: 367). This identity is only nascent in *Beowulf* but continues to develop in the tradition, appearing fully-fledged in *Battle of Maldon*.

Also rooted in the original mystical function of poetry is the aesthetic function of epic. In celebrating heroism epic celebrates humanity's transcendence of mortality. This celebration has enduring appeal, though epic's function as didactic and magisterial discourse gradually falls away with literacy. Audiences still respond to the aesthetic of heroism. The bleak and gloomy grandeur of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition makes this aesthetic particularly poignant in *Beowulf*; indeed, it can actually be seen as the theme of the poem.

Beowulf ends with a dubious victory. In slaying the dragon the hero is slain, and the poem powerfully suggests the tragedy that his death will bring on his people. The final note of the poem is not hope, but celebration of the only thing remaining to the Geats, the glory of their king's passing. Epic celebrates the individual, in the form of the hero, placing him at the centre and giving to his actions importance (Newman in Preminger & Brogan 1993: 369). This

demonstrates another of epic's particular qualities; it exists to show life as it is and to make it liveable, not to solve unsolvable questions. Fate propitious and vengeful, destinies happy and tragic, actions good and evil are all present in the world of epic because they exist in the world of men, but no conclusive answer to the mystery of their existence is offered. This is why in *Beowulf* old and new are held in tension so that the audience can adapt through it to the challenges of life.

Oral reciters begin *in medias res* not as a carefully chosen stylistic device, but because they have no choice but to (Ong 1982: 144). The *Beowulf* poet does not escape this tendency, literate though he may have been. His genius lies in knowing instinctively what to keep of the old oral ways, and what to reshape according to new literate sensibilities. He took an oral tradition fading into the past and forged a modern poem out of it. The scribe who finally recorded the poem divided it into *fits* (Wrenn 1973: 10), which only a literate person with some concept of the poem as a text and of a text as an object could have done, yet he wrote the words of the poem continuously like prose, suggesting that he still experienced the words more as auditory sensations in time rather than visual artefacts in space. He was probably a cleric, serving the new dispensation, yet he valued and recorded this secular heroic poem.¹⁶ Such hybrid noetics of the poem do not injure it; rather, as the inescapable preconditions of the poet's act of creation, they are actually, married with his genius, responsible for its poignancy. An appreciation of the importance of the characteristic ways in which noetic forces shape the poem requires us to attempt something of a paradigm shift, from the noetics of late typographic literacy (or early secondary orality) back to those of transitional vocality, yet the experience of the poem so gained is ample reward.

¹⁶ The poem that follows *Beowulf* in the Vitellus manuscript is *Judith*, a Christian story transplanted into traditional Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. The scribe obviously found them similar enough to place side by side.

CHAPTER THREE

Malory's *Morte Darthur*

3.1. Introduction: Malory in his noetic context

The fourteenth-century prose *Morte Darthur*, ascribed to Sir Thomas Malory, 'comes at an almost unique moment in the transition from late medieval to early modern methods of storytelling' (Hill 1963: 98), a moment just before the widespread use of printing ushered in the further shift from chirographic to typographic society. Like *Beowulf*, then, it was written at a period of noetic shift, though the changes from chirographic to typographic literacy are not as momentous as those from primary orality to literacy. This chapter will explore how the *Morte* (as I will call it) shows the end point of many early literate characteristics beginning their development in *Beowulf*, while still growing out of and utilising features of oral noetics.

The *Morte* is prose, impossible for primary oral narrative, but both the written Winchester manuscript and Caxton's printed edition, which are the two main forms of the work, retain the continuous style of early prose, with no paragraphs or indications of direct speech, and very little punctuation or capitalisation.¹⁷ While the narrator, who appears as a simple, somewhat naïve man telling a blunt tale without mannerisms (Field 1971: 102) is named in several colophons and in the text itself as Sir Thomas Malory, what this narrator has to do with Sir Thomas Malory in history and indeed how close the surviving text is to his original story are questions that remain debated. The texts of both the Winchester and Caxton versions are demonstrably at several removes from a posited common original (Vinaver 1947b: xci). This situation is complicated further by the fact that 'according to medieval literary theory a vernacular author was an impossibility', particularly in England, with the result that most Middle English texts are anonymous (Machan in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 234-5). Because of

¹⁷ This can be seen from facsimile pages from both these documents in the edition I will use in the chapter, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, edited in 1947 by Eugene Vinaver. This edition is drawn mostly from the Winchester manuscript.

the common store of tales existing in oral and literate traditions, which were the original author's materials, questions about identity of texts and of intertextuality between them lose much of their meaning. To a medieval author 'creating' a work of fiction was handing on, embellishing, expanding or abridging matter received from some source (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 24), and so Caxton, the scribes of the Winchester manuscript, and the unknown writers of the lost intermediary versions conceivably 'touched up Malory as Malory touched up his predecessors and by the same right' (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 26). When in this chapter Malory is referred to as the author of the work, what is meant is therefore the final hand (or hands) to fix in the Winchester manuscript the still nebulous text of what Caxton called *Le Morte Darthur*. The tales will be referred to by abbreviations: 'Arthur', 'Arthur and Lucius', 'Launcelot', 'Gareth', 'Tristram', 'Grail', 'Launcelot and Guinevere' and 'Morte'.

The *Morte* is usually classified as a romance. A general definition for medieval English romances is 'stories in verse', written to be heard, 'which deal with the adventures of noble men and women and which end happily', in which one or more of the following are often found: fighting, the marvellous, love and a courtly tone (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 1, 3). At first glance Malory's work may seem to fall outside this definition on several points: it is in prose, exists in printed books surely made for reading, and ends tragically. A more detailed look however reveals the justness of designating it a romance. Romance's main plot is always adventure, in the sense of 'the occurrence of unexpected and hazardous events', and its basic pattern (following Auerbach) is the attempts of a knight to test his prowess in feats of arms as an individual seeking martial encounters rather than as a member of an army at war (as in *chanson de geste* or epic) (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 3). Though wars do occur in Malory, for example in the 'Arthur', a more isolated focus on individual knights is the single most important structuring feature of the tales, carrying the main didactic thrust of the work, as will be explored below. This didacticism is also characteristic of romance, a lingering remnant of the role of primary oral epic in educating the people. However, as will also be explored below, unlike epic's encyclopaedic approach the didacticism of romance is focussed on exploring specific abstract

themes, usually of ethical or moral significance. To use Chrétien de Troyes' terms, the *matière* of the tale, its matter, the narrative of adventure, exists to propound the *sen*, its meaning or significance (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 3). Within this didactic project, which, as will be explained, is literate, the *Morte* yet retains heavy oral residue, a hybridisation from which springs the particular power of the work.

The *Morte* is rooted in a vernacular tradition in fifteenth-century England, or rather a 'non-tradition' of lay prose outside the mainstream culture of learned Latin and classical rhetoric (Field 1971: 35, 69). This tradition grew from spoken language without the numerous extra resources accumulated in the tradition of written prose which later dominated Elizabethan English. It is colloquial, uncomfortable with explanation, at ease with only simpler syntax such as parataxis and happier with narrative rather than analytical structure. As a style it is limited, unsuited for sophisticated thought processes, organising complex material or delivering ironic judgements (Field 1971: 34-5). Orality is central to this tradition and its aesthetics, because the second rate reputation of vernacular works repelled close literate scrutiny and theorising either in the writing or the reading/reception thereof (Machan in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 234-5). This tradition was becoming old-fashioned even when Malory used it, 'doomed to extinction by the proliferation of the printed word' (Field 1971: 35). The *Morte* is therefore valuable as a relict of the final days of chirographic culture in England.

The work shows ample evidence of dependence on a tradition shared by author and audience. The knights who appear after they are dead or before they are born obviously caused Malory and his intended readers no qualms, or the Winchester scribes and their intended audience either, because they have not been edited out; they are characters drawn from shared tradition, communal legend (Vinaver 1947b: xxxii). In one of the first battles Arthur takes part in after his coronation, he draws his sword, and this sword is named Excalibur (19.20)¹⁸ despite the fact that in the tale Arthur will only be given this famous sword much later (52) (Vinaver 1947a: 1286).

¹⁸ References to the *Morte* are given by page and line number.

Though Malory may have known this from his reading, his audience would only accept part of a shared tradition. This tradition used within the freedom of prose gives Malory certain leeway; for example, in the interests of his particular didactic focus he can suppress the ending of the Tristram story because he knows his audience knows it (Bradbrook 1958: 15). This dependence on tradition occurs within the context of vocalicity, with formulaic devices acting as signals for the established relationship between author and audience (Field 1971: 143).¹⁹

3.2. Stereotypical / formulaic expression

Characteristic of Malory is his 'lack of conscious artistry, his incapacity for abstract thought' (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 62), showing his work to be still profoundly mimetic, in Havelock's sense, rooted in vocalicity, heavy with oral residue. Yet paradoxically the *Morte* was composed on paper, and in prose. Thus, fundamentally oral noetics have to struggle to carry the additional burden of sustained syntax, and one of the results of this struggle is a stereotypical syntax.

The syntax of the *Morte* tends to follow a paratactic pattern, a 'simple declarative sentence or collocation of co-ordinate main clauses, and the expression by this of a sequence of actions, perceptions, or facts' (Field 1971: 38). Most of Malory's narrative sentences and many of his main clauses begin with 'and', 'but', 'then', 'for', and 'so', which establishes a continuity in the flow of his prose, each sentence taking up its predecessor (Field 1971: 39-40). Conjunctions even connect things that are not logically connected.²⁰ This style is found throughout, even in the late, more accomplished books (Field 1971: 42). Throughout the *Morte*, as will be discussed below, themes of combat and journeying tend to show most oral residue, so it is not surprising that this paratactic style particularly characterises these themes (Field 1971: 44). Malory's preference for parataxis is characteristic of writers of his age, as the sparsely punctuated prose

¹⁹ Malory is simpler than Chaucer; he seems unconscious of the opportunities of this tradition, and simply lets the story stand within it (Field 1971: 143).

²⁰ A similar pattern is found in the speech of sub-literates today, who use it to prevent anyone interrupting their train of thought (Field 1971: 42).

of the Winchester manuscript reflects the contemporary inability to conceive of units like the sentence or the paragraph (Field 1971: 39-40); this reveals the additive cast of oral thought (Ong 1982: 37), which cannot sustain the analytical structures of more complex syntax.

This parataxis has several effects: it creates an impression of honesty and is also unobtrusive, leaving the attention of the reader on the narrative rather than on the narrator (Field 1971: 40). Malory's manner is so impersonal, his unity of style bringing him so close to the action, that his interruptions in the action are difficult to notice (Field 1971: 155). This style is mimetic in Havelock's sense, where narrator and matter are one so that the audience may share this complete identification. Against this oral background then, Malory's rare authorial outbursts (1229.2 for example) are surprising, almost jarring, evidence of a fledgling literate consciousness of the text as a fabric overlying and showing the matter rather than as the matter itself. Even this has not lost the down of orality, as comparison with contemporary writing reveals that even in these outbursts Malory's language and form are stereotypical (Field 1971: 156).

Within the simple syntax of parataxis oral residue can be detected at the same three levels as in oral poetry: tone, formula and theme. In the first level, tone and rhythm, both the *Morte's* vocality and Malory's tendency to homophonic replacement (Field 1971: 74, Vinaver 1947a: 1525) suggest him to be highly sensitive to the sound of words. Within this frame of vocality, then, though the *Morte* no longer shows obvious traces of a tonal formula such as the Anglo-Saxon *hwæt*, signs of rhythmical formulaic devices are still detectable. Malory's rhythm is largely iambic, the rhythm of ordinary speech (Vinaver 1947b: xlvii n.2). Balanced rhythm is common; for example in the 'Arthur' a group of kings swear an oath of loyalty, and the list of names, the terms of the oath and the immediate preparations for battle (35.26-35) fall in two-stress phrases, following each other in easy sequence mirroring the orderly unison of the kings' intent. Malory provides early examples of the 'rounded period', a sentence with four main

periods of unequal length (Vinaver 1929: 106). An example is from Launcelot's long answer to the King in the 'Morte' (Vinaver 1929: 106):

Ond at suche tymes my lord Arthur, seyde sir Launcelot, ye loved me
and thanked me whan I saved your quene from the fyre,
and ye promysed me for ever to be my good lorde;
and now methynketh ye rewarde me evyll for my good servyse (1188: 24-29).

Though not strictly speaking a formulaic device, the balanced cadences and crescendo of verbs (loved, thanked, promised and reward) (Vinaver 1929: 106) suggest the text is highly suited to being heard.

When alliterative poetry is performed, the four-stress line with strict alliteration forms a horizon of expectation which contains audience and poet, as discussed in the previous chapter. Writing prose, Malory had not such a strict horizon encompassing him, yet writing to be heard he was still bound by the hermeneutics of vocality. That consciously or unconsciously he was affected by this is shown by his second tale, 'Arthur and Lucius', where his style seems to surrender almost totally to the metre of the source text, the alliterative *Morte Darthur*. He even creates alliterative passages where his source does not alliterate (Field 1971: 74). Though alliteration is not constant, the four-stress cadence is often maintained e.g. 213.3-6 (stressed syllables are in bold):

'I assente me,' seyde sir **Cador**, and **all** they seyde the **same**,
and were **agreed** that sir **Claryon** and sir **Clement** the **noble**
that they shoulde **dyscover** the **woodys** bothe the **dalys** and the **downys**.'

Another example is 214.21: 'Now, **felowys**,' seyde sir **Launcelot** and sir **Cador** the **kene**'. In both these examples an epithet is added to complete the metre of the line ('sir Clement the noble' and 'sir Cador the kene'). In the second the epithet retains its alliterative link with the name also. However, as lines 214.29-30 show, Malory is not tied to this oral metre: 'That **greved** sore sir **Launcelot**, sir **Cador**, and sir **Bors** the **brym**', which has an oral alliterative epithet, but overflows the four-stress line. In this use of alliteration, common in his sources and contemporary romances, Malory reveals how stereotyped his style is. Many of his formulae and proverbs alliterate, as well as many climactic phrases in the *Morte*, such as 'of a more nobelar

man myght I nat be slayne' (1231.22), or 'uppon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake' (1260.15) (Field 1971: 75). Together rhythmical patterns and alliteration produce a constant play of sound, a counterpoint that 'makes for a total engagement of the reader's mind and his sympathies' (Field 1971: 76). This recalls the hypnotic power of oral literature as described by Havelock (1963: 152-3).

The next level of formulaic device is vocabulary. Like *Beowulf* the *Morte* uses largely conventional diction and phrasing (Baugh 1970: 123), for example the violent words characteristic of romance and of the exaggeration of the romance world (Field 1971: 76). Comparison with contemporary records shows that Malory is 'putting ordinary words and phrases to powerful use rather than inventing or adapting words' (Field 1971: 58-9). This vocabulary is 'ordinary' in that the proportion of unusual, 'contextually improbable' words (in linguistic terminology), such as found in poetry, is small (Field 1971: 67). It is colloquial, not part of any of the mainstream literary traditions of fourteenth-century England (Field 1971: 58-9). In the 'Arthur and Lucius' Malory uses words which, though not found in his source, the alliterative *Morte*, are common in alliterative poetry e.g. 'pure' in 217.2 (Vinaver 1947a: 1379), suggesting he was working within a wider tradition. Against this general background the different tales do show variation of diction, heavily influenced by their sources. 'Arthur and Lucius', for example, shows many archaic terms, such as 'brand' for sword, while the 'Grail' abounds in words coloured by liturgical practice, with time measured according to the Hours of Prayer for example. On the level of episodes, hunting passages are particularly distinctive with a rich technical vocabulary (e.g. 137.14-7) that would act as a potent signal between Malory and his audience, as hunting was a major pastime and passion, and something of a status symbol, for the class of landed gentry to which they belonged (Field 1971: 33). Malory's use of the traditional vocabulary also follows a conservative trend, for rather than changing the wording of his source he simply adapts the context of significant words to endow them with new meaning. For example, in 'Arthur and Lucius' the repeated word 'worship' (e.g. 187.11, 21) in the source,

the alliterative *Morte*, means the dignity of a king (Vinaver 1947a: 1366), but in Malory it means the heroic reputation of a warrior knight.

The language of the English aristocracy was in Malory's day undergoing a process of Gallicisation, but here too Malory is relatively conservative. The French words he uses are those 'socially acceptable' in colloquial English, and French influence on his phrasing, idiom and locution is minimal compared to many of his contemporaries (Field 1971: 61-2, 65). Only names tend to remain French, possibly because they are units denotary in their entirety rather than in their constituents. Where Malory means the constituents to be understood he translates them (e.g. 413.4) (Field 1971: 63). His work, all in all, is rooted in a colloquial vernacular vocabulary and shows the conservative tendencies of oral thought.

The next level is formulae. Whereas *Beowulf* is built mostly of formulae, a cursory reading of the *Morte* shows a quite different fabric. Introductions and conclusions of tales and combat scenes tend to be most heavily formulaic (Field 1971: 56), so some other section must be examined, such as the first half of page 1049 from the 'Launcelot and Guinevere', one of the latest and most original of Malory's tales:

- 1 For sir Gawayne was a passing hote knyght of nature, and
 thys sir Pyonell hated sir Gawayne bycause of hys kynnesman
 sir Lamorakes dethe, and therefore, for pure envy and hate,
 sir Pyonell enpysonde sertayn appylls for to enpoysen sir
 5 Gawayne.
 So thys was well yet unto the ende of mete, and so hit
befylle by myssefortune a good knyght, sir Patryse, which
 was cosyn unto sir Mador de la Porte, toke an appyll, for
 <he> was enchaffed with hete of wyne. And hit myssehapped
 10 hym to take a poysonde apple. And whan he had etyn hit
 he swall sore tylle h[e] braste, and there syr Patryse felle
downe suddeynly dede amonge hem.
 Than every knyght lepe frome the bourde ashamed and
 araged for wratthe oute of hir wittis, for they wyst nat what
 15 to sey, considerynge quene Gweyver made the feste and
 dyner; they had all suspeccion unto hir.

The underlined phrases are formulaic, used throughout the work. Note the simple parataxis. In the field of medieval romance this is called 'minstrel style' (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980b: 21), and is a sign of oral residue. The rest of the passage, though its diction is simple and conventional

(‘myssefortune’, ‘ashamed’), is written freely. Sir Patryse is ‘enchaffed with hete of wyne’ (1049.9), for example, while Sir Launcelot in the same condition is ‘asoted and madde’ (795.9), and Sir Percival in slightly more sober condition ‘chaffet a lityll more than he oughte to be’ (918.9-10). This passage’s formulae express emotion, kinship structures and simple descriptions. Table 3.1 shows other common formulae.

Table 3.4: Common formulae

Type	Formula	Examples
shift in narrative focus	Now leve we Now turne we unto So upon a day So upon a morne Then/so it befelle	194.17, 1148.34 140.15, 1173.32 432.29, 1085.17 530.1, 1164.6 371.1, 1187.15
appeals to authority	As the Freynsh boke seyth/maketh mencion As the booke seyth To shorten this tale	362.24, 1145.1 317.12, 1148.22 380.11, 1153.17
appeals to audience	wete you well	355.31, 1178.9-10
journey	herde hys masse and brake hys faste hear mass and depart arise and hear mass	113.7, 174.10-1 890.31, 1000.10-1 877.22, 1020.3
battle	See themes below	
emotional	made passynge/grete/good chere/joy made grete dole/sorrow was passynge hevye wroth/woode oute of mesure rased/out of his wytte eythir made other good chere were sore abashed	113.3, 1045.5-6 258.12, 1230.8 70.7, 1227.12-3 56.11, 1227.22-3 190.25-6, 1049.14 261.19, 1012.20-1 612.13, 1049.22
description	ladies, damsels and jantylwomen kyngs, deukes, erlys, barons and knyghtes passynge/full/right noble/good/hote knyght	269.35-6, 1081.17-8 754.9-10, 1146.30-1 119.17, 1259.28-9

They are phrases common in colloquial use (Field 1971: 119-20); some are straight from the French e.g. ‘The best...of the worlde’ for ‘le plus...del monde’, and others replace Gallic formulae e.g. ‘smote them over their horses’ tails’ for ‘les fait voler a terre’ (Field 1971: 85). Interestingly, some French formulae Malory eschews altogether (Field 1971: 85), suggesting that rather than just translating he was drawing on an English tradition without counterpart for these formulae. The formulae show traces of oral noetic processes, and effects of the constraints of vocalicity. Signposting of narrative shifts aids vocal hermeneutics, while appeals to authority and direct appeals to the audience help to establish that intense identification of speaker with audience necessary for oral performance. Formulae of journeying and description reflect the

social structures and hierarchies of values that constitute society. The emotional formulae, particularly characteristic of romance, reflect the intense agonistic nature of oral noetics, and though not individualised in any way are never semantically empty, or used just to fill time or space. They express something real, ‘the grief for a suicide, the compassion for a burial or the curiosity for a quest: a structural part of the action’ (Field 1971: 89). The ‘Launcelot’ and the ‘Tristram’ are both based on prose sources, yet show the same density of formulae as do the tales with directly poetic sources. This again suggests that Malory was working within a colloquial oral tradition, with formulae still to some extent his natural building blocks of composition. The style of the last two tales, in which Malory is most original, relies heavily on adapted formulae. For example, ‘a trew and anynted kyng’ (1194.28) has a formulaic ring to it, but is Malory’s own addition (Vinaver 1947a: 1623), consistent with his fifteenth-century conception of kingship, (as will be discussed in section 3.6 below). ‘And there nother kyng, duke, erle, barowne, nor knyght, lady nor jantyllwoman...’ (1202.23-5) uses the first two descriptive formulae listed in Table 3.1 above, but with literate freedom combines them to suggest the entirety of courtly society. Malory seems to be oral enough to conceive his work in oral terms, yet literate to the extent that his use of formulaic devices is no longer strictly conventional. Some formulae are repeated within individual tales only, creating for each tale a specific intratextual linguistic context to replace the all-pervasive extra-linguistic context of primary orality. Sometimes formulaic devices seem intended to signal conventionality/traditionality, sometimes they seem used simply because available (as when Elaine, the mother of a full-grown knight, is incongruously called ‘a full fayre lady, freyshe and yonge’ 1018.23), and sometimes they function with striking effect in the particular narrative situation. They still function as they do in *Beowulf* to create a uniform background against which departures are more effective, as when after healing Sir Urry Launcelot weeps ‘like a beaten child’ rather than ‘making grete dole’. These departures come at critical moments of moral and emotional significance in the main character’s lives (Field 1971: 98) and form part of the process of creating more rounded, self-conscious characters (see section 3.6).

A particularly interesting sign of the text's hybrid state of oral literacy is its formulae of narrative shift, which, though they are signs of oral residue, are visually signposted in the text by capital letters. An example is 196.10: 'HERE FOLOWYTH THE DREME OF KYNGE ARTHURE'. Line 1154.16 in 'Launcelot and Guinevere' reads 'AND HERE ON THE OTHIR SIDE FOLOWYTH...', showing that the writer of this sentence obviously envisions his tale as a written, even printed work existing in space rather than in sound. However, related formulae, 'as aftir ye shall here in the tale folowyng' (378.19-20), or 'as ye have harde toforehande' (1169.20), found even in the last two books, make clear this work was also meant to be heard.

The most formulaic scenes are combats, which will be discussed under themes, below, and the *explicit*s which, though they are personal addresses to the audience, are highly formulaic, built of prayers and Latin and French tags. They are formal, not intimate (Field 1971: 154), and largely correspond with those in the works Malory was translating (Matthews in Mandel & Rosenberg 1970: 85). Those demarcating sections within tales most commonly use a 'now leve we' or 'now turn we' formula; the colophons ending tales are built of formulaic elements as shown in Table 3.2.²¹

Table 3.2: Formulaic elements of *explicit*s

Formula	A	A and L	L	G	T	Grail	L and G	M
'drawne'	*				*	*		
'out of the French'	*				*	*		
'here/thus endyth'	*	*		*	*	*		*
'noble tale'			*					
'by sir Thomas Malory, knight'					*	*	*	*
'knyght presoner'	*							
'have mercy'					*		*	
'send good deliverance/recover'	*			*				*
summary of tale	*	*						
indications of following tale		*			*		*	
title of tale repeated		*	*	*	*	*		*
prayer ending in 'amen'	*				*	*	*	*

²¹ Line references for the colophons: 'Arthur' 180.6-15, 'Arthur and Lucius' 247.1-7, 'Launcelot' 287.28, 'Gareth' 363.18-22, 'Tristram' 845.27-6.5, 'Grail' 1037.8-14, 'Launcelot and Guinevere' 1154.16-9 and the 'Morte' 1260.16-29.

Overall, the colophons reveal the same balance of oral and literate. Repetition of title and content, the 'Arthur' colophon's use of the common formula 'as the Freynshe booke seyth', and the 'Morte' colophon's rhyming couplet ending (1260.27-9) suggest oral mnemonics, while the 'Launcelot and Guinevere' colophon's use of the phrase 'here on the othir syde folowyth' reveals a literate understanding of a text as a physical object.

Malory also uses formulae to create a characteristic speech pattern for his knights that tends to ironic humour and taciturnity (Field 1971: 108). Use of this body of speech links a character to all the other knights and to the ideal of knighthood developed in the book.²² The formulae used tend not to change in tense, word order and pronoun person or into a negative or interrogative form, though elements such as intensifying adverbs are used for variation. These formulae often stand alone or are introduced by 'X said'. Examples include 'I woll that you/thou wete' or 'That/Hit is trouthe' (Field 1971: 107). This use of formulae must reflect Malory's method of composition, for proportional use of these phrases increases towards the later books, as he develops his own style, while they are found in 'Arthur and Lucius' only where he is inventing linking passages, or where speeches refer to Launcelot (since in this tale he is Malory's addition) (Field 1971: 108).

Two particular types of formulae often used are oaths and proverbs. Oaths such as 'by my faith' make colloquial speeches more forthright and dignified ones more elevated (Field 1971: 125), and are characteristic of vocality (Crosby 1936: 107). Proverbs are sayings that choose concrete examples to embody the abstract generalisations an oral mind cannot make, and form part of the tradition common to author, characters and audience. Widespread use of proverbs is characteristic of aristocratic writers of Malory's time (Field 1971: 125), which reveals their orality. Malory's dependence on tradition is shown by the fact that his rare explicit judgements on life in the *Morte* tend to be spoken by characters and clothed in proverbs, some introduced as 'old sayings' and some slipped in (Field 1971: 126). Again, the increasing use of proverbs in the

²² Characters who are not knights also occasionally use these formulae.

later books (Field 1971: 127) suggests that they naturally brought forth Malory's thinking on abstract matters. The proverbs tend to preach resignation, such as Launcelot's 'ayenste deth may no man rebell' (1251.13), or to spur to action (Field 1971: 127), which are the ends at which Malory's entire work is aimed. His use of proverbs gives his message an 'air of universality and impersonal authority' and adds to the dignity and pathos of his characters' predicaments (Field 1971: 127). They express the last remnants of oral *mimesis*.

Malory's use of formulae also depends on his sources, as does his vocabulary. 'Arthur and Lucius' shows features from the alliterative *Morte* including tags, inversions and alliterations: 'while we thus in holes us hide', 'that was wary and wise' and 'shred them down as sheep in a fold' (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 21-24). This tale's many heroic formulae use markedly archaic and poetic words and often alliterate. They are chosen from the texture of the source, so some are used only once, such as: 'lyvir nor lungys' (222.18), 'bryght swerde' (220.13), and the whole line 'his bowerly bronde that bryght semed' (208.1). An interesting example of an oath is 'the devyll have thy bonys that ever thou were borne' (216.7-9). This is a formula repeated from 214.11-12, and replaces a long tirade in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1379). Use of a formula to express a conventional heroic sentiment is characteristically oral. The 'Grail' is shot through with formulaic prayers (e.g. 928.26-7) and formulae of time following the hours of prayer (e.g. 896.14, 907.20). Malory's dependence on his sources reflects the awkward position he occupies as an oral-influenced author writing within a tradition no longer encompassing the complete discourse and lifeworld of poet and audience. His method of composition depends largely on formulaic devices, for he cannot easily form his thoughts into new words, but he has not been trained into as all-encompassing a tradition as the *Beowulf* poet for example, so he draws some of his phrases from whichever source he is using. A small detail from 'Arthur and Lucius' throws light on this dynamic. In the narrative phrase 'thus the Emperour with all hys horryble people drew' (194.5) the word 'horryble' is added by Malory (Vinaver 1947a: 1369), a narrative comment characteristically reflecting Arthur's point of view. So Malory appears content to use the ideas and words of the earlier poem, secure that his audience will accept this, but at the same

time feels free to remodel them as he wishes. He remoulds his matter and is moulded by it at the same time.

The next level of formulaic structure is theme. Malory shows examples of many traditional themes common in romances and carried through from epic, such as judicial fight (1138), heathen enemy (842), dying hero destroying his sword (1237-9), prophetic dream (1233), epic voyage (1036) (Hill 1963: 104-5), set speech by hero leaving his country (1201) (Field 1971: 69-70), quest (103), knowing a hero by his looks (213), speech of encouragement to an army (238), feast (286) and tournament (1087-8). Arming of hero before battle appears twice, on 200.3-8, where three of 15 items from the source are mentioned (Vinaver 1947a: 1370-1), and a remnant on 871.11-15. The marvellous sword (995) appears with the sword's materials given, not its history, which is characteristic of romance as opposed to epic (Hill 1963: 4). Malory also creates internal themes by repeating scenes in various tales: knight arrives at castle/abbey, is received, taken to a room and disarmed (261.9, 966.20-1), hand clothed in samite (943.7-8), knight becomes a good man and a hermit (286.17-8) (which deals with minor characters in a literate tying-up of loose ends), and aimless wandering by a knight (272.34-6) (which covers a transition of sources). In the waning vocalicity of Malory's text these repeated scenes function through their created familiarity to reassure an audience of the authenticity of what they are hearing. Then, on an even narrower scale, Malory sometimes repeats scenes in local clusters, rarely more than twice, as if he is copying himself. The coming of the Grail (793.21-30, 798.21-32, 865.17-34, 1018.29-33), a dwarf with 'a grete mowthe and a shorte nose' (140.26-7, 164.37) and a cloak made of king's beards (54.29-55.4, 201.18-22; both from sources Vinaver 1947a: 1297, 1317) are copied between tales, while a boat driven ashore is repeated within the 'Tristram' (441.2-3, 30-1).

The Grail example can be examined in more detail. In the two descriptions from the 'Tristram' (793.21-30, 798.21-32) the details included are identical and verbal correspondence is high: the Grail is accompanied by a dove with a 'lytyll sensar of golde', 'such a savour as all the spycery

of the worlde had bene there' and 'all maner of metys and drynkis', and appears carried by a girl, 'devoutly' honoured by all present. The first of these passages includes the detail that the food is 'all maner of meates and drynkes that they coude thynke uppon' (793.16). The two passages in the 'Grail' (865.17-34, 1018.29-33) show less closeness: both mention miraculous food, and that everyone present is very much struck; the second passage uses the word 'abaysshed'. In both passages verbal echoes show links back to the 'Tristram' passages: in 865.29-30 the hall is filled with 'good odoures' and in 865.30 the doublet 'metis and drynkes' is used, while in 1018.30-1 the food is described as 'all metis that ony harte myght[t] thynke'. However, both these passages are coloured by 858.12-859.9, the passage telling of the coming of Galahad to court, since Galahad is intimately associated with the Grail, having been born of the Grail maiden in the castle of Corbenic, and being the only truly pure knight in the world destined to achieve the Grail Quest. His coming is attended by these details among others: all the doors and windows shut by themselves (13-4), the people are 'abaysshed' (15) and an old man clothed in white who appears mysteriously from no-one knows where (4-5). In the 865 passage, the Grail is covered in white samite (27-8) and disappears mysteriously, no man knows where (33-4). In the 1018 passage all doors and windows shut of their own accord (32-3) and those present are 'abaysshed' (33). Thus by using narrative details and verbal echoes, Malory, in translating his sources, builds a pattern of clustered motifs that is very oral.

In this example Malory does not alter his sources to produce these echoes. An episode in the 'Launcelot' where the hero fights two giants (271) shows how he can do so. In two previous incidents in the 'Arthur and Lucius' the giants, as in the source, carry metal clubs (203.4, 221.1), so in 271.31 Malory's giants have 'horrible clubs' rather than the swords of their source. On this same page a 'passynge foule carle' appears also with an iron club not in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1412), suggesting leaking of the giant theme due to associative thought patterns. Further oral traces show themselves in the association of certain narrative units with particular characters: a naked knight beaten with thorns appears twice (254.25, 960.22-31), and in both cases Sir Lionel is involved; the Questing Beast is associated with first King Pellinore,

then Sir Palomides (42-43, 484.4-11); and finally Sir Launcelot shows a tendency to sleep under trees, in 253.28 an 'appyll-tre', in 893.31 'a tre' and then in 932.22 an 'appyll-tre' again. The strength of this urge to repeat in Malory is shown by this last, which is '*ung grant pueplier*' in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1546).

As mentioned above, oral residue is particularly obvious in passages describing certain scenes, such as combat, burial, arrival or departure. It appears that as orality became literacy in England certain themes retained their currency for longer, and so still find a place in Malory's work. Indeed, the most common theme in the entire work is single combat between knights, either occurring in isolation or as part of a tournament or battle. A strong romance tradition exists, in which 46 separate narrative details associated with this theme have been identified (Baugh in Mandel & Rosenberg 1970: 123). In Malory more than 60 such details can be identified (see Table 3.3), and any particular occurrence of the theme seems to be a selection from this storehouse of commonplaces. For example, even in so mystical a scene as the episode of Bors's wounding by the Grail spear, he is hurt in a formulaic place, the shoulder (799.34). As with the examples examined above, Malory's use of themes reveals its orality most strongly in its aggregative tendencies. On one occasion Malory adds to the most common formula for ending a combat: 'than he raced of his helme and smote of his hede' a practical detail: 'than they wente to souper' (656.3-4). This same cluster of ideas appears a few lines later, in another addition to the source: 'raced of his helme and smote of his hede. Than the Haute Prynce and quene Gwennyver went to souper' (658.28-9). In both cases the victorious knight is Sir Palomides (Vinaver 1947a: 1492); for this section of text at least it seems these narrative details have become attached to his name in oral aggregative fashion.

Table 3.3: Details making up the Single Combat Theme

Formulaic detail	Examples
arming before battle (dressing shield, blessing himself, mounting horse, taking spear in hand); 'made hym redy'	68.19-22, 482.7-10
the verbal challenge	68.24-7, 559.20-7
'do battle to the utteraunce'	178.5, 624.24
hear mass and break fast before battle	174.10-11, 177.31-2
the opponents run/ride together	109.8, 486.22
riding as fast 'as hys horse myght dryve/ryde'/with all their might	68.22, 322.24-5
the adversaries coming together like thunder/bulls/boars/ lions/rams/madmen/fierce knights/men wild and courageous	143.32, 486.22
the adversaries put their shields before them the adversaries 'threwe' their shields before them the adversaries 'dressed their shyldes' / 'dressed hym' 'put/kest hys shyldes afore hys shulder'	111.23, 424.32 382.10, 450.20-1 105.9, 486.24-5 559.28, 561.15
dressed their spears 'fewtred their spearis in their restis' 'toke hys glayve in hys hondys' 'keste spearis in featwr'	399.10, 559.28-9 69.17, 160.18 111.19-20, 215.2-3 322.24, 494.29-30
knight strikes down several opponents with one lance 'had a (grete) falle'	174.21, 760.32-761.1 752.29, 1108.5, 1110.16
come together so fast that both horses and riders are knocked to the ground	89.23-4, 486.23-4
one adversary is borne off his horse	109.10, 24-5
one adversary carried over his horse's crupper/tail	69.22, 539.4-5
horse and rider born to the ground	174.22, 659.16
grounded knight lies still / 'a grete whyle'	563.21, 1111.28
struck so hard that horse's back is broken	159.25, 599.9
spear/s are broken	177.35-6, 559.30
smite so that shield shatters; smite through shield +/- body	69.19-20, 129.8-9
smite in the middle of the shield	142.21-2, 322.25-6
knight skewered, truncheon of spear remains in left side, has to be drawn out	222.17, 945.13-16
grounded knight requests his mounted adversary to fight on foot	105.4-6, 482.25-6
a knights leaps off / 'voids' his grounded horse ('lyghtly and/or delyverly')	115.26-7, 486.24
mounted knight alights to fight on foot	109.20-1, 305.32-3
draw their swords	111.22 486.25
'stroke togydirs myghtyly', 'gaff many grete strokes'	106.4, 416.14
fighting on the right hand and on the left hand	400.26, 561.16-7
one/both fighters are angry, 'wrothe oute of mesure'	143.18-9, 486.21
'trasyng and traversyng'	298.30-1, 425.3
'foynyng +/- rasyng +/- hurlyng'	298.31, 416.15
give such a buffet that opponent reels back x strides	323.1-3, 508.21-2
shield cloven in two by a stroke	306.4-5, 602.2
blood bursting from mouth, nose and ears	145.17, 818
(hot) blood running out, much bleeding	111.25, 568.34-569.1
all the ground is red with blood	89.38-9, 450.9
knight struck heavily on the head bows almost to horse's neck / to the ground	143.15, 581.11-12
X smote Y a great stroke on the head/in the middle of his shield	107.12, 22, 314.7
smote such a buffet that the knight falls to the earth	405.30-1, 494.31-3
hurt on the (left) side	160.14-5, 599.30
hurt through the shoulder	509.22, 799.34
hurt through the thick of the thigh	539.13, 783.1

Table 3.3: Details making up the Single Combat Theme cont...

horse's head is struck off / horse hurt by mistake	77.25, 656.29
adversary kills horse on purpose	354.35, 415.15-6
one adversary 'waxes light and big' / 'bygger and bygger' as other weakens	143.23-4, 416.18-9
adversaries have many wounds	111.27-8, 486.29
adversaries grow ('passynge') weary	111.28, 323.7-9
one / both withdraw a little to rest	143.33-4, 451.10
one adversary/both lie grovelling on the ground	306.9, 415.31
one adversary falls to the earth dead	129.3, 129.9
knight redoubles his strokes seeing opponent's weakness/shamed by taunts	111.30, 416.19
winner unlaces loser's helmet to strike off his head	106.13-4, 419.6
vertical stroke through head, killing opponent	105.10-1, 460.20-2, 1140.3-5
fight continues for formulaic period e.g. 'two hours' or 'more than half a day'	298.31, 569.1-2
or until a formulaic time	323.6, 17
winner demands the loser yield	111.31-2, 174.23-4
loser yields (and cries for mercy)	106.8-9, 405.31-2
the two make friends (and swear to be brothers)	161.17-9, 165.33
loser offers homage with his sword	174.301, 569. 32-3
loser flees	382.32, 561.19
onlookers make admiring comments	143.29-30, 444.24-6

The formulae used to create battle themes tend to carry full semantic content, and so are often used in highly concentrated form. Spectators' formulaic comment often sums up fights, particularly tournaments e.g.444, and a single combat can be reduced to verbal challenge and formulaic outcome (e.g. 462.29-31). Formulae are used to describe battle, as when in the battle against the army of Sessoyne, Tristram slays two knights with one spear, slays on the right hand and on the left hand, and all onlookers marvel (622.9-12). Characters use formulae when recounting fights; for example, Dinadan telling Palomides of the fight between Tristram and Launcelot (596.1-5) says they fought more than five hours, they both bled much, all onlookers marvelled, and they ended by swearing eternal brotherhood. This combat between the two ideals of knighthood is ideally expressed in formulaic terms, drawing to itself all the power of traditional associations.

Within this conventional framework Malory adapts formulae and narrative details to suit his needs. He adds details specific to the episode, as when in Arthur's combat with Accolon the false Excalibur breaks and Arthur is afraid for his life (144.4-8). Also, sometimes formulae are used in unusual conditions, as when in Tristram's fight with Galahalt the Haute Prince (416-7)

the yielding formula is applied to Tristram though he wins, for he is forced to yield because of the Prince's many followers. Similarly Arthur's helm is formulaically removed (491.19-21) so the vengeful lady Aunowre, rather than his knightly opponent, can strike off his head. In 1055.18-20, words of challenge are adapted into legal statement before a trial by combat. Formulae can also be inverted, as when instead of unlacing Didadan's helm Tristram buckles it on, imploring the reluctant knight to fight (507.35-6); or used outside the Combat theme, as when Mark traitorously slays a knight without warning, smiting him 'on the hede that the swerde wente to his teithe' (578.25). They also apply to combats with non-human opponents e.g. Marhalt's fight with the giant (175-6), and La Cote Male Tayle's fight with the lion (460). All these suggest how consistently Malory's conception of combat scenes is still cast in oral terms.

Other themes show more signs of literate adaptation. Another traditional theme found in Malory is burial, with the preparation of Lucius and his allies for burial described in 'Arthur and Lucius' (225.7-13), and that of Guinevere in the 'Morte' (1256.18-20.)

Lucius and allies 225.7-13	Guinevere 1256.18-20
The kynge let bawme all thes with many good gummys and setthen lette lappe hem in syxtyfolde of sendell large, and than lete lappe hem in lede that for chauffyng other chongyng they sholde never savoure, and sytthen lete close them in chestys full clenly arayed, and their baners abovyn on their bodyes, and their shyldes turned upwarde, that eviry man myght knowe of what contray they were.	And than she was wrapped in cered clothe of Raynes, from the toppe to the too, in thirtyfolde; and after she was put in a webbe of leed, and than in a coffyn of marbyl.

The earlier passage is longer, and its rich alliteration reflects its source (the alliterative *Morte*) and its rootedness in oral tradition. Both passages show simple paratactic style, and mention unguents ('gummys' and 'cered' meaning 'saturated with wax'), fine cloth ('sendell', fine silk or linen, and 'clothe of Raynes'), manifold wrapping (with a formula 'in x-folde), an inner coffin of lead and some kind of outer coffin ('chestys' and 'coffyn of marbyl'). The order of these details is identical in the two passages. The longer passage adds the displaying of the slain men's shields and banners over their coffins, which is suitable for this theme in the context of the tale, and of Malory's conception of honourable knighthood. However, it also adds an explanatory detail, that the lead is used to prevent the corpses disturbing the living with an

offensive smell. This practical hint would not be out of place in an oral encyclopaedic epic. By the time the final book is written, this traditional detail is lost, with one of Malory's favourite agonistic doublets 'from the toppe to the too' added instead. Themes are becoming separated from the practical real lifeworld.

Other examples suggest the breakdown of themes themselves. In the 'Arthur and Lucius' certain formulaic details are repeated, such as cold wine: 'dranke of the colde wyne' (217.4-5), 'colde whyght wyne' (234.17). In the source these instances form part of a theme, the refreshment of knights after battle. However, in the second example where the source has the knights' wounds washed with water while they drink the wine, Malory telescopes this to the wounds washed with wine (Vinaver 1947a: 1391). This suggests that Malory, though sensitive to formulae, sometimes loses touch with the 'tension of essences' that holds the specific details of specific themes together as logical units.

Other traditionally oral themes have been lost altogether. These include the *ordo artificialis* (beginning *in medias res*), the *ubi sunt* theme (Field 1971: 69-70), the hero's visit to hell and the substitute death. While the first of these is an oral mnemonic necessity, the others are rooted in the noetics of primitive mythology, in the religious and ritual rather than political or intellectual functions of epic, and their absence suggests how the function of epic has changed for Malory and his audience compared to those men and women who performed *Beowulf*. The Funeral and Combat themes share this ritual origin and are also fading; funerals are rudimentary in the *Morte* as shown above, while the Combat theme now serves a primarily socio-economic function, as will be discussed in section 3.6. The quest theme, which like the voyage and the pilgrimage symbolises the human journey through life (Field 1978: 47), has separated from the lifeworld of audience and author, becoming instead a semi-magical rule of the poetic world of romance, as will be discussed in section 3.4. The Anglo-Saxon symbolism of the hall shows some remnant in the feast theme, common in romance, representing good fellowship and order; the feasts at the start and end of tales help to create a sense of unity, though the tales are about

individual knights (Bradbrook 1958: 22). The Great Tournament of the 'Launcelot and Guinevere', which has no parallel in the source but is a theme found in the stanzaic *Morte* and the *Mort Artu* and is used earlier (1087.31-1089.8) by Malory himself (Vinaver 1947a: 1578) is the last and greatest expression of this theme just before the tragic ending.

This is actually Malory's greatest departure from the themes of orality. He is interested in motive, in human character and the problems we face, in a manner more conscious than the *Beowulf* poet could conceive of. Despite all the set-piece battles and *beserker* behaviour, the 'wete you well's and the 'passing wrothe's of the 'Morte', the power of the last tale comes from its tragedy, and this is poignant in the great speeches made by the characters: Arthur's 'quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company' (1184.3-5), Launcelot's 'of you I have had myn ertly joye' (1253.19-20) and 'of hir beaulté and of hir nobless' (1256.29-30). The characters realise and speak the abstracts that are crumbling, rather than the physical fact of death as in *Beowulf*. This is characteristic of romance, which concentrates on relationships, both between individuals and between concepts and ideals (Hill 1963: 105); it is also only possible in a literate society. These last tales also show a paradoxical combination of formulaic emotional actions, such as when Arthur and his knights 'wepte and sowned' (1184.12-3, 1185.18-9), with vivid individual actions expressing personal relationships, such as when Launcelot seeing the dead queen's face 'wepte not gretelye, but syghed' (1256.3-4). This paradox is encapsulated in a small theme in which a hero, Tristram in 467-8 and the dying Gawain in 1231-2, writes a letter to explain himself and his motives to those whose opinion he values. This theme is an oral cluster of ideas rooted in the oral didactic function of literature: both letters aim to exculpate the writer of dishonour, of transgressing the heroic code, and both are addressed to Launcelot, the ideal embodiment of this code (see section 3.6). These oral concerns are paradoxically expressed in the literate act of writing a letter.

Malory's broader treatment of his sources sheds light on this paradox, as an examination of his substantial reworking of the first two episodes of 'Launcelot and Guinevere' (Vinaver 1947a:

1575-7) shows. He untangles the *entrelacement* structure of his French source (which will be discussed in section 3.8), and then links the resulting sections with passages of his own. This straightening process, as will be shown, is thoroughly literate; an examination of formulaic devices will reveal how oral the added sections can be said to be. Malory adds *a*) a first dialogue explaining Launcelot's departure from court (1045.22-8.10), *b*) a second such dialogue (1065.24-6.23), *c*) a dialogue between Launcelot and Lavayne (1073.27-4.31), *d*) a description of the Alhallowmass tournament (1087.31-9.8) and *e*) the Maid of Astolat's monologue (1092.9-95.14). All these additions use formulae. Formulae for emphasis are most common ('wete you well'), followed in frequency by description of emotions ('with grete hevynes', 'made grete dole') or social structures ('ladyes, madyns and jantillwomen', 'false recrayed knyght'), and narrative ('So hit befelle'). 'As the book seyth' is used to account for emotions an outsider would have no way of seeing (1048.7). Journeys and tournaments are mentioned using formulae ('harde masse and dyned and...departed', 'rode a grete walop', 'be ayenste'), and so additions *d* and *e* have a higher proportion of formulae than do the others. The first two additions, both dialogues between Launcelot and Guinevere debating their love, use almost no formulae. *D* uses the theme of a knight with a truncheon in his side, while *c* combines highly formulaic combats and praises with a list of names, which is literate (as will be discussed in section 3.8 below). *E* uses the theme of a letter in a dead hand (letter laid in hand, boat covered with cloth etc), but for the rest, when the Maid is defending her love for Launcelot, has few formulae. The pattern is clear; when examining the motives of characters, untwisting the strands that make up human behaviour, Malory finds his own words because he has to, as there are no formulae available to him. Otherwise, he uses the conventional phrases of romance.

Finally, on a level wider than themes, Malory's work shows formulaic elements. On the level of individual tales the 'Gareth', though it has no known source, has a parallel in medieval French romance for almost every important incident; its main plot line is almost identical to that of 'La Cote Mal Taillée' in the French prose *Tristram* (Vinaver 1947a: 1417), and bears strong resemblance to Malory's own episode of that name in the fifth book. The amorphous form of

the *Morte* itself, 'a collection or anthology of tales about the Round Table' with very little else giving it structure²³ recalls the vast epics of oral literature, discrete sections of which can be told independently. However, as explored above, this oral formlessness is balanced by a literate tendency to tie up all loose narrative strands. Also oral are the links Malory creates between tales, such his addition of the scabbard hanging at Galahad's side (859.8) at his first arrival at court, anticipating that he shall draw the sword from the stone. These make each tale more independent, with inbuilt links to tradition so they can be told separately from within the tradition. These links also function to place the tales within a poetical framework of history and space parallel to, but largely separate from, the lifeworld of author and audience, as will be discussed now.

3.3. Ceremonial, formulaic appropriation of history

Malory has a strong sense of history, which is an epic rather than a romance sensibility (Bradbrook 1958: 23), but his concept of history is complex and profoundly medieval. He presents the story as consisting of unalterable historical facts over the presentation of which he has little control, for example calling for prayers for Sir Tristram as for himself (683.2), which shows an oral disregard for objective distance, or narrating the meeting of Sir Tristram and Isolde while simultaneously insisting that the scene is beyond what human tongue can tell. He cites 'the French book' 70 times, as if he cannot alter the facts it contains (Field 1971: 145). In fact, of course, he chooses both the facts and the method of presentation from his various sources. His formulaic references to 'the French book' actually mark moves from his sources into details of his own invention, especially in the last two tales (Vinaver 1947a: 1646). The colophons and the formulae of narrative shift discussed above refer to leaving the story, returning to it, telling the main points of it, and so on, creating a style like that of an historical chronicle, which adds to the text's demand to be viewed as history (Field 1971: 145). Thus though exercising a literate control over his material Malory, and so presumably his audience

²³ This is especially obvious in the Winchester manuscript, which lacks divisions (Bradbrook 1958: 19).

also, seems to need to present the tales as real history. Yet the experience of history presented in the *Morte Darthur* is far from the *participation mystique* of oral history, discussed in Chapter 2. Malory has a distinct awareness of an historic past in which the tales are set, a past in which men and beliefs were different. The formula ‘at that tyme’ shows this clearly, as when in a rare narrative interpolation the author writes of Launcelot and Guinevere that ‘love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays’ (1165.13). However, use of this same formula to express simultaneous or immediate action suggests that its use to suggest past history is an adaptation of an oral device to express a newly developed sense.

The very fact that Malory tells these Arthurian stories suggests oral residue, because these stories exist only in an unbroken tradition passing from oral tale to written story.²⁴ This tradition formed Malory’s material when he turned to writing his own version of the story of Arthur. In true oral style, Malory seems to have thought this traditional material was history (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 48), but his medieval understanding of history was more fluid than the modern view. Recent English history, Roman history and legendary history were all seen as equally true and equally accessible to artistic remoulding, a distinctly oral noetics not unique to Malory but visible in for example Chaucer and Shakespeare also (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 49). Caxton’s preface and his editorial practice show him to have shared this belief in the historicity of the Arthur legends, and in the right of the later historian to adapt the work of his predecessors. A closer examination of Malory’s treatment of his material will make clear the level of oral residue in his historicity.

Malory himself relates his story to his contemporary audience in a direct address in the last tale (1229.6-14):

6 Lo, ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschuff here
 was? For [Arthur] that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght
 of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble

²⁴ For a summary of this tradition, see Field, P.J.C. 1978. ‘Introduction’ In Field, P.J.C. (ed.) 1978. *Sir Thomas Malory Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. pp.1-67.

10 knyghtes, and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yet
 myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym.
 Lo thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe, and
 men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom.
 Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for
 there may no thyng us please no terme.

This passage shows Malory's use of history arising from three tendencies: intense nationalistic fervour ('Englysshemen', 'thys londe'), belief in a golden age ('moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde'), and the setting of this age in the remote past ('olde custome'). Firstly, then, the awareness of being part of a nation called English, absent in *Beowulf*, is strong throughout the *Morte*, shown by the careful delineation of sources as 'French' books and the tendency of the narrative to side with Arthur on all occasions. In the early books the narrative falls into the first person in the stress of battle, talking of 'oure knyghtes good' (223.3), 'oure foreryders' and 'oure buysshemente' (243.1-2), and in the last book this becomes the direct address to the audience quoted above. It is as national hero that Arthur is 'the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes', as will be discussed further in section 3.6 below. Secondly, the grand theme and hero required by oral mnemonics become with the passing of this noetic need the memory of such grandeur, nostalgia for a golden age. Though Arthur may be adapted in the *Morte* to resemble a contemporary fifteenth-century monarch (see section 3.6), he and his kingdom are separated in time from Malory and his audience in a way impossible for the performers of oral epic. Thirdly, this sense of the remote past is achieved mostly through Malory's narrative intrusions, which create that feeling of long ago (Field 1971: 144). These intrusions show an awareness that contemporary practice has changed in many areas of life, from fashions (403.25) and matters of etiquette (1076.14-16, 1121.14) to linguistic matters (405.5, 1050.2), legal codes (1055.12, 1174.20-1), burial customs (1258.32-3) and even love itself (1119-20, 1165.13).

One of these intrusions hints at the real function of this temporal duality built into the texture of the tales: line 293.3 sets the tales 'In Arthurs dayes'. The name of Arthur, the greatest king England has ever had, acts as a talisman opening the portal to her golden age. The fictional age

the tales occupy is in the past, but in no linear earthly past. These stories are history, but history in the oral sense, history which has moulded itself to a semi-literate society's mythical and psychological needs, through the long process of oral transmission. This modelling process can be clearly seen in the 'Arthur and Lucius'. Malory probably knows (as the two *Morte* sources show) that Arthur's downfall traditionally follows his return from Rome, yet he deliberately changes this and makes his second tale end in triumph. This is a possible tribute to Henry V, but mainly to Arthur and all he stands for in imagination (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 47).²⁵ Whereas in the alliterative *Morte*, Arthur while on continental campaign leaves Mordred regent of England, in 'Arthur and Lucius' two knights are left regent who are modelled on the men entrusted with the rule of England by Henry V (Vinaver 1947a: 1361). The description of the crowning of Arthur in Rome is also original to Malory, perhaps a tribute to Henry V's victories in France (Vinaver 1947a: 1362). Malory seems to see history not as something objective and inviolate but rather as a living tissue of memory, and his elastic treatment of facts is entirely consistent with other oral tendencies, including that of introducing factual, commonsensical details, such as Guinevere's twenty thousand pounds, to make his sources more 'historical' (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 49).

Within this golden age, as in the world of *Beowulf*, time is often symbolic or archetypal rather than chronological. Medieval life followed the great liturgical cycles, the annual series of feast days and the daily ritual of the hours of prayer, and the world of Malory's *Morte* shows this sense of time. For example, in 'Arthur' the boy king manages to pull the sword out of the stone at Christmas, Candlemas, Easter and Pentecost (15.33-4, 36, 16.7-10), and several of the other tales revolve around Arthur's Pentecost feasts. Side by side with more modern formulae such as 'ten of the klok' (1121.2) or 'seven of the klok' (1170.9), time is measured by the hours of prayer e.g. in the 'Grail' 896.14, 956.17 and the 'Morte' 1193.32. This ritual time framework embraces the world of Malory and his audience and that of the tales, uniting them. Within this

²⁵ Postponing the tragedy also functions in the narrative; the end is more poignant if we have seen the glory of that which fails, the "flower of chivalry of the world", a whole noble way of life' (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 47).

framework, Malory is not interested in the age of his characters or in chronological time, unlike his French sources (Field 1971: 96). On several levels time seems to follow archetypal patterns. The overall structure of the tales follows the fortunes of Arthur: the first two books trace the rise of fortune's wheel, the next three its zenith with little movement discernible, and the last three the accelerating momentum of its fall (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 48). On the level of characters' lives, apart from major figures such as Arthur or Launcelot, chronological presentation of the lives of individual characters does not seem essential for writer or audience. A minor character, Sir Carados of the Dolorous Tower, even appears in 'Gareth' (343.28) after his death at the hands of Launcelot has been reported in the preceding tale (266.26). Even the presentation of a relatively major character, Tristram, shows inconsistency, as he is a full-grown man in the fourth tale while his birth and knightly training are only related in the fifth tale. There is no evidence of any attempt to make the beginning of the 'Tristram' a retrospective narrative (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 55). The sense of passing of time is less important in the middle books, which tell of the timeless present of the glory of Camelot, as it were. It is in these books that the inconsistencies of minor characters occur (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 48). Finally, on the level of individual episodes, Malory's time is definitely more mythical than his source's. For example, in 137.1-2 the simple phrase 'than hit befelle that Arthure and many of his knyghtes rode on huntynge...' replaces the source's detailed time scheme of a Monday morning, three days after the end of the last tale (Vinaver 1947a: 1338). The measurement of time tends to be formulaic, and to fall into balanced patterns. For example, in the 'Tristram' the hero lies in a swoon 'three dayes and three nyghtes' (495.11-12), and Palomides and Keyhidines seek him for 'three dayes and nyghtes' (497.19-20). These patterns owe much to a residually oral tendency towards balanced aggregative thought, but some of them also reveal traces of mythical significance. In the French *Suite de Merlin* Gawain's supernatural strength begins increasing at midday, and fading again at three in the afternoon. Malory moves this three hours earlier, making the waxing of Gawain's strength begin at nine o'clock (161.1), and its zenith at midday, with the sun (Vinaver 1947a: 1350). This time-frame suggests an aesthetic closer to the mythical roots of romance heroes, some of whom have been traced back to Celtic pagan deities

and folk-heroes (Field 1978: 3), and suggests an older, more oral origin for the story, since in romance literature the older the story, the more magic is involved (Bradbrook 1958: 23). However, barring a few traces of pagan mythology, such as Merlin, Excalibur and the spells of Nineve, Malory seems to make an effort to expunge the supernatural from his tales, which shows his imagination to be losing touch with oral superstition. Remnants of ritual orality cluster particularly around the figure of the king, who in the *Morte* is a figure adapted in oral fashion to contemporary significance (discussed in section 3.6 below). In the 'Tristram' (491.1-2) the slaying of a king, foretold by the Lady of the Lake, will take place in ritual time, signalled by a formula: 'for the same day and within thys [two] owrys shall be done the dolefullyst dede that ever was done in thys londe.' The ritual time of poetic discourse is strengthened by the alliteration of the formulae.

Within the mythical, indeterminate historical space created by poetic discourse Malory takes pains to maintain a sense of history, so that the tales present one course of events covering a single tract of time (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 50). This is a debated critical point, because the order of the tales in the Winchester manuscript is not necessarily the order in which Malory composed them, or intended them to be heard. However, Brewer has argued that the order we have is the only possible order, and examination of the texts of the tales in this order shows a remarkable degree of cohesion, with references back and forth between the tales in the form of incidents and words unique to Malory (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 50). A particularly important example occurs at the end of the first section of the 'Arthur', where a reference to Mordred is accompanied by the phrase 'as hit rehersith aftirward and towarde the ende of the MORTE ARTHURE' (56.4-5). This is not in the French source, the *Suite de Merlin*, so it either has to refer to the French *Mort Artu*, with which Malory was acquainted when he wrote the 'Arthur', or to Malory's own 'Morte' (Vinaver 1947a: 1298, Brewer in Bennett 1965: 50). Vinaver suggests that if the latter is the case, the lines quoted above must be an interpolation by a later hand, perhaps a scribe copying the complete work (1947a: 1298). Brewer suggests an alternative:

...the likely reason for this remark, if it is indeed Malory's, is surely that he was thinking forward not particularly to his own translation, if he projected it, but to the 'future' event which was part of the whole historical Arthurian sequence, whose cohesion underlies his work. (in Bennett 1965: 51)

In other words, enough of an oral tradition still exists for Malory and his intended audience for such a reference to be understandable and acceptable in the performance of the work. These lines thus function as a signal of conventionality, as well as a marker of chronological sequence. One other future reference, found in 82.21-3, reads 'And as hit tellith aftir in the SANKGREALL that sir Percivall his syster holpe that lady with hir blood, whereof she was dede'. The capitalisation suggests a thoroughly literate understanding of the tales as separate entities, though this is probably due to the scribe, since other future references, such as 91.20-1, 97.29-31, 126.4-8 and 179.26-180.5 show no such awareness. As well as these future references, the text includes backward glances to episodes in previous books, for example 862.2-7, 863.3-9 and 1198.11-34. (These references also serve as repetitions, a function that will be discussed further in section 3.8 below.)

Thus overall, Malory's text seems to bear a relationship to history that shares definite oral traces. As suggested above the tales are conceived as relating the events of a particular tract of time, a definite period of history, and some remnant of an oral tradition about this history seems to have been known to both Malory and his intended audience. However this historical space is purely poetic, a golden age that never actually existed. The tradition too is very different to a purely oral poetic tradition. The colophon of the 'Arthur' reads 'AND THIS BOOKE ENDYTH WHEREAS SIR LAUNCELOT AND SIR TRYSTRAMS COM TO COURTE. WHO THAT WOLL MAKE ONY MORE LETTE HYM SEKE OTHER BOOKIS OF KYNGE ARTHURE OR OF SIR LAUNCELOT OF SIR TRYSTRAMS...'. The tradition on which Malory depends is now largely recorded in 'bookis', and this allows Malory as a writer more freedom than his predecessor poet, the author of *Beowulf*, ever enjoyed. As will be discussed further below, signals of conventionality such as formulae and traditional epithets and names signal entry into a space separate from the sphere of the real lifeworld of audience and author. This is what differentiates romance from epic. In this

freer world of romance the audience is 'forgiving' in a different sense, granting the author licence to deviate not so much from history, since oral tradition always remoulds historical fact, but from the tradition itself. For example, in 179.36-7 the text states that 'sir Pelleas was a worshypfull knyght, and was one of the four that encheved the Sankgreal', which is inaccurate both to the source and to Malory's telling of the tale (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 51). Vinaver suggests confusion with the name of Pelles, the Grail King (1947a: 1359) as the source of this. The point is that neither Malory nor his subsequent scribes, or presumably their audiences either, found this inaccuracy unacceptable.

This location of the tales in poetic time, of necessity self-contained and resonating with mythological archetypes yet still linked to actual history, is mirrored by their location in space. Epic space is that of the lifeworld of the audience, though shaped by mythological significance, while romance space is typically separate from real physical geography, a step on the way to the heterotopia of fantasy. Malory's world shows traces of both epic and romance. Unlike the geographically indistinct Logres, the fairy kingdom of the French sources, Malory's setting is within well-defined boundaries of recognisable parts of England. Important places in the story are linked to English cities, for example 'Camelot, that ys in Englyshe called Wynchester' (832.17-8). Some geographical details added by Malory seem to reflect the nationalism of the tales, for example in 371.11-20 the description of Arthur as king of 'Ingelonde, Walys, Scotlonde, and of many othir realmys'. Other details reveal the practical realism with which Malory invests his tale (which will be discussed further in section 3.4 below); for example in 163.24-6, where in the source Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt simply ride off in different directions (Vinaver 1947a: 1351), Malory's Gawain rides to the north, Ywain to the west and Marhalt to the south. Sometimes these references also reinforce the sense of history, for example 'she cam to a castell that is called Magowns, that now is called Arundell, in Southsex (635.22-4), (where the two verbs both in the present tense reflect the reality of both the real and the poetic world). Malory's choice of geographical details is sometimes even reminiscent of the War of the Roses (Vinaver 1947a: 1276-7), revealing his oral moulding of history. For example, in 1233.6-10 and

1255.22-5 the counties which side with Mordred are the southern, Yorkist counties (Vinaver 1947a: 1633). The presentation of geographical details also reflects the dependence of Malory's art on oral tradition, with references such as 1257.27-8 'Somme men say it was at Anwyk, and somme men say it was Bamborow' surely intended to present a surface of verisimilitude, irrespective of the accuracy of the information.

However, between these real-world landmarks the world of the *Morte* is literate, an indistinct maze of 'vast and shadowy landscapes and forests' (Bradbrook 1958: 24) without mythological significance or real geography. As the historical time of the *Morte*, England's golden age, is both necessarily separate from chronological history and linked to it, so the world of the tales is at once the same as contemporary England and yet a superimposed, self-contained space. This separation is a paradigm shift from the *mimesis* of orality, and shows the beginnings of the heterotopia of fantasy.

3.4. Standardisation of themes

If the time and space of the *Morte* show traces of literate separation of art from the lifeworld of author and audience, its matter will probably show similar effects. Before the effects of literacy can be examined, however, the basic orality of the thematic and conceptual content of the *Morte* must be established. As discussed in Chapter 2, by virtue of its high level of residual orality, medieval poetic discourse points to the receiver's lifeworld (Schaefer in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 121). As a work still functioning in the paradigm of vocalicity the *Morte* could be expected to show a similar restriction of themes. Such a restriction has been noted in other chroniclers and letter-writers among Malory's contemporaries, who write with interest in their matter, and without that element of play found in nearly all of what we call literature (Field 1971: 38). Malory's interest in his matter is undeniable, evidenced by such passages as his approving interjection 'AMEN, SAYDE SIR THOMAS MALLEORRÉ' after a prayer for the soul of

Tristram (683.4)²⁶, or his admonition to the people of England on the fault of faithlessness (1229.6-14). His seriousness is equally obvious, making the *Morte* almost as free of irony as *Beowulf*, with no place for 'irony or discriminated levels of perception or knowledge, in author, reader, and characters' (Field 1971: 45). Even such burlesque episodes as Launcelot and Belleus accidentally in bed together (259-60) are treated as important events revealing the character and duties of knighthood. Dinadan, the only partly humorous character, is repeatedly and purposefully incorporated into the knightly ethic by phrases approving his mettle and honour (e.g. 605.10-20, 665. 9-10). The characteristics of interest and seriousness suggest that Malory identifies with his matter to a degree still oral, one result of which is the text's texture of verisimilitude, noted above. 'The story seems to take place very much of itself, to be reality impinging directly on us rather than to be manipulated artefact' (Field 1971: 45).

This experience of verisimilitude can be misleading, as it masks the question of how far the world of poetic discourse, Malory's world, actually overlaps with the lifeworld of contemporary England. Such overlap at first sight seems unlikely, since the tales tell largely of idealised knights riding mysterious lands and encountering apparently motiveless adventures with giants, monsters and damsels in distress. However, Knight has pointed out that 'authority, both aristocratic and masculine, is a central feature of medieval romance' (1986: 83). The entire chivalric world can be seen as a social power system based on the medieval ontology in which people are understood as primarily social, only individual in aberrance or transition (Knight 1986: 126). The ruling aristocracy forms a society held in shape by the systems traced in *Beowulf*, feud and *comitatus*, which also control land-ownership and so also power. In light of Feeny's point that themes of combat and social order are involved in the transmission of control systems preventing anarchy (in Foley 1992: 197), the conventional romance plot reveals its functioning. A new young knight has to forge alliances within the power structure, eventually

²⁶ Vinaver suggests that this interjection is an interpolation by a later hand, prompted by a reluctance to assume responsibility for the excessive claims made about Tristram in the preceding section (1947a: 1498). If true this only supports the idea of the original author's identification with his material, for it implies that he felt no qualms about its historicity.

winning land and wealth of his own, so he leaves society, riding through imaginary wastelands on a lonely and competitive course to prove his worth in adventure, until in the end he is reintegrated into society in triumph (Knight 1986: 84, 126). Thus characters like Gareth and Torre, for example, lurking landless and friendless on the edge of the chivalric world, represent 'historically real states' (Knight 1986: 84-5). Love is used in romance as a mechanism to ennoble warriors, pointing them to prosperity (Knight 1986: 84), so the final triumph is often symbolised by the marriage of the hero. Other mechanisms for the socialisation of conflict in the ideal world of romance can be found: the withdrawal of one knight in a quarrel (a formulaic device discussed above), the lady's sister for one of them to marry, and the formal jousts (Knight 1986: 85). On one level, the theme of the *Morte* is the breakdown of this mechanism, because of a fundamental conflict of loyalties within its constituent systems.

This socio-political theme is not unusual for romance. Romances give an enlarged and idealised picture of everyday life of the knightly classes (Bradbrook 1958: 12), a picture simplified 'by the omission of administrative responsibilities and (usually) of pressing need for money; and by the absence of peasants, lawyers and merchants. The Knight is reduced to his essence, the fighting-man able and perhaps willing to fight for land or reputation or justice' (Field 1978: 47). This simplification has its roots in the function of epic to train individuals in the values and structures of society. By the fourteenth century in England, the trend seen in Anglo-Saxon writing for using written prose to preserve and transmit factual information, such as technological and legal knowledge, had advanced. The only domains left to literature were those more intangible subconscious fields, matters of cultural taste, societal value and, particularly, political beliefs, Feeny's control systems preventing anarchy. The *Morte*'s concentration on the theme of Combat, common also in other romances, is not surprising. The individual characters of the tales embody social states, and their adventures explore society's structures, making the work didactic without being allegorical. The characters may be types (see section 3.6) but it is the dilemmas they face and the actions they take that teach the laws of chivalric society.

Malory's didacticism is thus still profoundly oral, and has not yet taken the step to allegory which Havelock describes in epic's progress from orality to literacy (1963: 56 n.20).

The restriction of the themes of romance explains the restriction of the society it pictures to the aristocracy. The world Malory depicts is that of the knightly class to which he belonged.²⁷ The society of the *Morte* is produced by the 'almost complete elimination of other social classes into a distanced and universalised society' (Field 1978: 47). Features of contemporary aristocratic life are shown, such as the 'grete noyse of mynstralsy' inside a castle (320.26-7). The role of the minstrel is hinted at in the episode of Dinadan's lay of King Mark, where the singer by virtue of his office can insult even a king to his face (626.7). The list of occupations for which Torre shows so marked a predilection (100.3-5), in a passage added by Malory, reflects the pastimes of aristocratic fifteenth-century men (Vinaver 1947a: 1321). One of these pastimes, hunting, is one of the few activities described in detailed technical vocabulary, in passages such as 137.1-17, 375.17-22 and 682.25-683.4. Comparison of a passage in praise of Tristram as a hunter (682.28) and a real epitaph for Edward Duke of York from the early fifteenth century shows how lifelike Malory is being (Field 1971: 146), not only in fact but also in faithfulness to contemporary moral and social values. Since Malory's intended audience was also, most probably, aristocratic, these shared values function to bind the world of the tales and that of the performance together. Further evidence of this is the running joke through the fifth book, the 'Tristram', about the cowardliness of Cornish knights (e.g. 398.26-31) which is an ancient remnant of earlier poetic versions of the story (Vinaver 1947a: 1449), and presumably a commonplace preconception in aristocratic society. This reveals the oral conservative bent of Malory's thought.

²⁷ The actual Round Table motif itself suggests an origin for the Arthur tales in a rather different society, more ancient, as the need for a round table to settle squabbles of precedence, as given in *Lazamon's Brut*, caters 'less for the vassals of an overlord than for the members of some primitive horde' (Bradbrook 1958: 21).

Malory's world is still structured fundamentally by the same two systems that structure the society of *Beowulf*, but, unlike the Anglo-Saxon poem, the *Morte* examines rather than merely upholding them. The feud system still operates and revenge is part of the knightly code (367.2-5), but is softened now by knightly courtesy and honour. For example a feud between Tristram and a knight named Darras ends when Darras admits that Tristram killed his sons in fair fight, 'by fors of knyghthode', and Tristram admits that Darras imprisoned him 'but as a naturall knyght ought to do' (552.24-6, 30-1). Family loyalty, which lies behind feuding, is still pervasive, with Malory often adding to his source the lineages of characters (e.g. 167.35-7, 267.5-6). However, the tragedy of the final tale centres on a questioning of the feud system's efficiency in solving social conflict. Gawain at first willingly forgoes his right to avenge his sons, accidentally killed by Launcelot, in the name of knightly fellowship; his inability to maintain this forbearance when he learns of the death of his brothers precipitates and powers the bitter civil war which follows within the Round Table. Malory points this lesson by adding that Arthur would have made peace had it not been for Gawain (1190.17-20). Arthur's great speeches of lament for the breaking of the fellowship, also Malory's additions, suggest that the feud system, rooted in biological family ties, is passing in favour of more abstract loyalties to society and nation.

Family loyalty is also intertwined with the other major structuring system, the *comitatus*, which has evolved into the chivalric code and changed somewhat in the process. Tristram says on seeing Launcelot's kin fighting, '...well may [h]e be called valyaunte and full of proues that hath such a sorte of noble knyghtes unto hys kynne. And full lyke ys he to be a nobleman that ys their leder and governoure' (526.20-4). The association of military fame and ruling power with aristocratic birth is clear. The triple tie of political power, *comitatus* loyalty and family bond that held the aristocracy together is visible in Gawain's address to Arthur as 'my kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle' (1186.1). Some elements of the classic *comitatus* ethic are still visible, most obviously the desire of every knight for prowess and the fame it wins. Personal devotion of warriors to their lord seems unchanged from oral epic, with the whole work apparently

hinging on Arthur, *Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus*. In the early books, the tale of Arthur's difficult ascent to the throne of England, this loyalty is shown as the foundation of a king's power. In the middle tales, the 'Launcelot' through to the 'Grail', each knight's individual glory just goes to increase the glory of the Round Table and of Arthur, as is symbolised by the return of each knight to court at the end of each tale. Launcelot sends the knights he frees to await him at Camelot (269.1) like a *comitatus* warrior giving his winnings to his lord, and declares it his duty to 'revenge [his] speciall lorde and [his] moste bedrad frynde' (744.25-6). However, an interesting speech by Tristram suggests that this virtue is fading. In 391.12-5 Tristram lists his reasons for fighting Marhalt: 'for the love of myne uncle kynge Marke and for the love of the contrey of Cornwayle, and for to encrece myne honoure'. Loyalty is first to family and then to nation,²⁸ but these loyalties are upheld in the interests of personal reputation. This overriding search for fame is a romantic development of epic. Beowulf's fight with Grendel is not romance, because the hero fights to protect his people rather than for the primary purpose of showing his prowess (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 4); in Malory the motivation for a knight's fighting has become 'for to avaunce [his] dedis and to encrece [his] worship' (376.26-7). With the integration of Christianity, fame is no longer valued as a means to immortality but for itself alone. When Launcelot is at last taken in the queen's room, he fears not death but dishonour (1166.8-10). This sentiment echoes over and over (144.19-21, 408.28). Knights choose to fight only the greatest opponents available so as to win maximum honour (734). This overriding concern leads Malory to alter his sources quite drastically, as when Percival's sister, in the source an allegorical figure of Christian purity, is prepared to die to increase the honour and worship for her lineage first, and only then for her soul's health (1002.30-2). Also, while the text repeatedly says that Arthur's 'worshyp' holds the fellowship together (e.g. 1183.13, 1053.32-6) this personal devotion to Arthur does not really come across in the action of the tales, except in the character and actions of Launcelot. Instead the knights seem to uphold the Round Table, or rather the High Order of Knighthood itself, of which Arthur is merely a

²⁸ Also like Beowulf, Tristram is fighting for his adopted country; he is lord of Lyones, but is fighting as champion of Cornwall.

figurehead. Thus literate development sees concept replace king. This overall pattern seems, however, to be unconscious, because in individual instances the text uses a person rather than an idea, as when, rather than apostrophising Fortune, as he does in the French source, Malory's Arthur calls on Launcelot (1238.11).

The rewarding of valorous service with land, seen in *Beowulf* and discussed above as the actual focus of romance, appears in several concrete examples in the *Morte*, such as the estates Arthur gives to Torre (113.33). This reciprocal disposition of power and property also lies behind many other narrative details. Generosity to gain the loyal service of subordinates is a virtue praised to young king Arthur in the first tale (37.21). Even in the last, least oral book, Launcelot protests the siege of his castle of Benwick by citing his right, as a loyal thane, to better treatment from his lord (1192).

In one important aspect Malory differs from his sources. Courtly love, so important in the French, is secondary in the *Morte* to the tie of friendship and honour that exists between knights, because the Order of Knighthood is what the tale upholds and teaches. This is particularly obvious in the 'Tristram', where rather than glorifying love, no matter how adulterous, as the earliest French sources do, Malory's Tristram values his duty to fight in Isode's name more than the lady herself (Vinaver 1947a: 1436). Thus, though 'kyssynge and clyppynge' is a 'kyndely thyng' (804.36-805.1), love is seen as fundamentally opposed to chivalric honour: a wedded man is forced to 'leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures' (270.31-2) in Launcelot's famous speech. The sentiment is particularly powerful in the mouth of the ideal knight (see section 3.6), and encapsulated in colloquial 'doublets'. Vinaver suggests that Malory was unaware of the French tradition of courtly love, and of the French Arthurian tradition behind it (1947a: 1403), but there is another explanation for Malory's departure from his sources. Courtly love is a control system designed to prevent the breakdown of social hierarchies (Lewis 1936: 12), as is the code of martial chivalry, so the *Morte* merely replaces one system with another. In this Malory is remaining faithful to his

audience's lifeworld, for real full-blown courtly love never developed in England (Bradbrook 1958: 18). As the Arthurian story in Malory's hands tries and rejects the feud system, it also probes the weaknesses of love as a control system, since Launcelot will be caught between love and honour, and the whole Round Table destroyed because of this. Thus, though women have a far more prominent role in the *Morte* than in *Beowulf*, and some even approach roundedness as characters (Isode's repeated concern for Tristram's safety and honour is developed by Malory, for example), overall they remain in the background of motivation for the chivalric exploits of the knights. Sir Marhalt asking for 'herborow' says, 'I am wery, my damesel and my horse both' (172.35). This is the status of women in Malory's world, next to horses as symbols of a knight's position and the laws that bind him.

Another defining feature of fifteenth-century society which informs Malory's world is religious faith. Compared to his sources Malory appears to strip his tale of religious sentiment (Vinaver 1947a: 1522). His 'Grail' shows this, being a tale of chivalry and adventure rather than the allegorical exposition of the Cistercian spirituality of his source. Malory presents a concept of chivalry and right-living which fuses with holiness. 'Knyghtly dedys and vertuouus lyvyng' is a synonym for the duties of a good Christian (Vinaver 1947a: 1523). This accords with the common medieval moral view that knights must stay in the Order to which they are called (namely knighthood), but must live it as it ought to be lived (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 17). This ethical rather than mystical functioning reflects the restricted nature of more literate epic, without the ritual or religious functions of primary oral poetry. Further examination of the 'Grail' yields a deeper understanding of the reason behind Malory's changes. Its source is a theological work about grace, consisting mostly of abstract thoughts and indifferent to physical reality; form, colour and movement matter only allegorically (Vinaver 1947a: 1526). Such abstract thinking suggests a very literate mind, and Malory is still far too oral for this. His genius is 'concrete, dramatic, moral; rooted in feeling, not in generalising intellectual power' (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 63). For example, in the *Launcelot* episode of 'Grail', the source has a party of earthly knights in black fighting a group of celestial knights in white, which Launcelot

must choose between. Malory has a simple tournament (931) replete with formulae ('smote down a knyght, horse and man', 'he drewe out his sword') where Launcelot's lesson is to abandon 'bobbaunce and pryde of the worlde' (933.32). This does not mean Malory's text is unaffected by faith; on the contrary Malory's world is 'sustained by God, whose presence and mysterious purposes are occasionally revealed by miracles, visions, and prophecies' (Field 1978: 52). Bors boarding a ship and 'betok[ing] hym to Jesu Cryste' (974.28) is part of the simple unexamined religious framework of the work. This framework draws on the resources of liturgical tradition in word and image, sometimes awkwardly, as when God appears as 'an olde man com downe with a company of angels' (928.29-30), and sometimes with great beauty, as in Launcelot's prayer to the Trinity (1152.20-5). The pagan concept of fate has all but disappeared; 'God may well fordo desteny' says Pellinor (119.31), in an addition by Malory (Vinaver 1947a: 1329). It is within the framework of faith that Malory's knights show forth the Order of Knighthood.

Legal terminology and systems are depicted, still firmly linked to the governing systems of a military aristocracy ruled by a *comitatus* ethic. For example, Tristram decides to fight for the king of Ireland so that the king will be in his debt (406.13-5). The final tragic plot is actually driven by a legal problem, the fallibility of trial by combat (1197.30-1), since Launcelot is too strong to be defeated whether he fights for right or wrong. However the presentation of legal issues reveals an uneasy compromise between oral involvement and literate distance. On the one hand Malory seems aware that judicial customs such as burning queens are distinctly out of date (1174.20-3). He is aware of and repeatedly calls attention to an important linguistic change in the meaning of the word 'treason', which in the world of the text can refer to any crime; he gives examples of this use, as when the queen of Ireland calls Tristram 'the same traytoure knyght that slewe my brother' (389.29). On the other hand the court Malory represents about Arthur, which is held together by personal loyalties and is distinctly international (Launcelot and Tristram are kings in their own right), is characteristic of the medieval courts of contemporary Europe (Field 1978: 22). Also, Malory sometimes moulds the text to conform to

fifteenth-century practice: Arthur's crown has to be approved by 'lords and comyns' (16.10, 22), whereas the source only has lords (Vinaver 1947a: 1285). In Guinevere's final conviction for adultery and treason, Arthur is a fifteenth-century monarch, sentencing rather than referring to his barons (Vinaver 1947a: 1617). At other times Malory falls into description almost oral in its prescriptive detail, such as the trial of Palomides: 'And within three dayes twelve knyghtes passed uppon h[e]m, and they founde sir Palomydes gylty, and sir Saphir nat gylty, of the lordis deth' (775.7-9). Malory's flashes of historical distance may reveal literate noetics, but his use of the story to show the moral is thoroughly oral. In this he reveals the understanding of his age, since both he and Caxton wrote in a time when moral literature was understood to have definite practical implications (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 102). The trial of Guinevere is an example of practice embodied rather than taught. Malory allows the *matière* to yield the *sen*, with readers not told what to approve, but shown by the narrative (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 101). This is an epic characteristic not shared by Malory's source, which as a romance is 'not content to *narrate* events, [but] endeavours to *interpret* them' (Vinaver 1947: lx).

As discussed above, Malory's vocabulary is that of ordinary everyday discourse. Using these very ordinary words he builds scenes consisting mostly of action, with a minimum of description. We know so little of the physical appearance of the characters that the mention (for the sake of alliteration) of Arthur's 'gray yghen' (185.12) comes as a kind of shock. In the description of action too Malory concentrates less on the physical circumstances and more on the significance of the action (Field 1971: 89). This lack of description is carried to the surreal, as when Arthur, waiting to receive Excalibur, is described as seeing 'a damesell goynge uppon the lake' (52.25) with no means of transport indicated. One method Malory uses to avoid description is to appeal to the imagination of his audience; for example, in 42.15 the Questing Beast first appears, seen by Arthur, as the 'strongeste beste that ever he saw or herde of', but is not described apart from the sound it makes. This appeal to imagination is encapsulated in a formula, 'that men can think of'; for example, a feast is set with 'a clothe leyde richely besene of all that longed to a table,... all wyne and metys that they coude thynke of' (138.1-3). The

phrase ‘richely besene’ is another descriptive formula, equally vague in actual visual detail. These formulae set the scene within the extra-linguistic tradition, recalling all the feasts ever told in story, and yet they also call on the audience’s personal life experience, on each person’s individual imagining of the most sumptuous meal possible. This simple device connects Malory’s world with the real lifeworld of his audience, and he uses it throughout the *Morte* even without such signal formulae. A description of a castle by the sea in 320.24-29 is an example:

25 And than they rode unto the dykes and sawe them
 double-dyked wyth full warly (warlike) wallys, [and there were lodged
 many grete lordes nyghe the wallys,] and there was grete
 noyse of mynstralsy. And the see bete uppon that one syde
 of the wallys where were many shyppis and marynars noyse
 29 with hale and how (heave ho).

The description of the castle as ‘double-dyked’ is conventional; the adjectives used are general (‘many’, ‘grete’); the vividness of the scene springs from the evoking of familiar sounds, of a minstrel’s song, of waves on the rocks, of the voices of sailors in a busy port. Occasionally descriptions appear to transcend the fictional world and meet real experience, such as the passage describing Tristram’s prison experience (540.28-36). Perhaps the dependence of the discourse on the lifeworld experience of author and audience makes it very easy for the narrator to slip into expressing his feelings about his own sufferings in prison. Where Malory does add descriptions these tend to be consistent with contemporary styles. A royal procession is described in 1196.8-21 for example (Vinaver 1947a: 1623) in terms of green and white velvet, cloth of gold, pearls and precious stones, which is consistent with the world of fifteenth-century aristocracy, but the figures added, of a hundred knights, a thousand ornaments, signal the idealised, enlarged world of romance. The romance’s mix of fantasy and the up-to-date ‘allows the listener to identify himself with a hero of almost superhuman prowess, yet matches him against forces which stress his humanity and normality’ (Bradbrook 1958: 24). Thus the formulaic nature of description functions like the restriction to an aristocratic cast, in making the tales universal in application.

This vagueness is also seen in descriptions of social practice, which are so vital in the tribal encyclopaedia of epic. Launcelot treated for wounds is given ‘a thyng in hys nose and a litill dele of watir in his mouth’ (1086.25-6). Similarly, in 45.7 Arthur greets his mother ‘in the beste maner’ but the manner is not described. Battle scenes are sometimes given with the grisly detail of the *Iliad* (208, 222 for example), but, as explored in section 3.2, the wounds to shoulder, side or ‘thick of the thigh’, or the vertical stroke through the head, or the bursting of guts, are all conventional. In general Malory decreases detail in physical fights (Field 1971: 90). A few episodes seem to present more detailed pictures of the yielding of a town (241-2), of ransoming prisoners of war (625.8-11) and of the physical development of knightly skills (466.20-30). These last two are not in the sources (Vinaver 1947a: 1456, 1484), and would have been familiar to Malory as a knight. In all the tales, though many men are knighted, the actual ceremony is never described. The only hint of contemporary practice is perhaps a detail in the description of the knighting of Galahad; Launcelot asks his son if he wishes for knighthood himself (854.22), a question not in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1532) and perhaps part of the fifteenth-century dubbing ceremony. Chivalric ritual statement, a feature common in French romances and retained by Malory (Field 1971: 99), is the repeated presentation of social custom in formulaic but vague terms. For example, at the end of the tale of Sir Gareth, all the knights he has conquered appear in order; each ‘dud omage and feauté to sir Gareth, and all thes knyghtes to holde of hym for evermore’ (361.14-5, 21-2 and 27-9). This kind of statement functions to show that the characters are proper knights (Field 197: .100). The vagueness depends within the context of vocal delivery on the similarity of the text world with the lifeworld of the audience, and is a product of residual orality.

The vague formulaic nature of much of Malory’s description of scene and action sets up a fabric of conventional verisimilitude, universalising the story and linking it to the lifeworld of the audience at the same time. Against this uniform background, then, occasionally vivid diction and imagery lights the world of the tales to life. In 118.57, for example, Sir Pellinor’s dead daughter lies ‘with a fayre yalow here’. This visual detail is decidedly oral (Havelock 1963:

189). In phrases such as ‘...thorow the thyckyst pres he thryled thorow’ alliteration and repetition make the action more immediate (465.12). Every now and then, too, a colourful colloquial idiom is used e.g. ‘as the wede growth over the corne’ (306.1-2) ‘we rowe ayenste the streme’ (619.6). These function rather like Homeric similes, linking the poetic to the real world. Malory is noted for the practical commonsense cast of his text, borne out by such details as Launcelot’s recognition of the queen by her cough (805.19-21), or the comfort he derives when, after a night of grief and remorse, he hears the singing of the birds (896.10-1), or the fleeting description of him lean with fasting (1255). Particularly characteristic of Malory also is his addition of practical pecuniary details, such as the queen’s twenty thousand pounds paid in the search for Launcelot (831.3), or the King of Little Britain assuring Arthur that his troops come ‘at my costis and wages’ (189.7). Where sources have supernatural or fantasy elements, Malory routinely removes them and adds in mundane details (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 11). For example, in ‘Arthur’ he suppresses the Merlin-Nineve story, a tale of enchantments and prophecies, in the interests of the Arthur-Accolon story, which is of a king and a traitor (Vinaver 1947a: 1277). One supernatural detail left is Arthur’s quip to a giant he has cut down, that now his height is ‘lyke unto oure ferys’ (221.10-11); this is consonant with Malory’s conception of Arthur as English, hero of a nation with a distinct character and national myths. A similar belief can be postulated for the giants and dwarfs which appear throughout the tales – even in the tragic climactic book, in what is basically a historical chronicle of the Siege of Benwick, a damsel and a dwarf appear (1212.27-8) and do not seem out of place.

‘Verbomotor’ aspects are present in Malory’s world but are on the wane. Though written communications are often introduced, e.g. 615, 785.16, the scene where Arthur has a clerk read a letter aloud to the court (1096.26) reflects an aristocratic mistrust of literacy common in England and France into the sixteenth century (Field 1971: 12). In the text, on several occasions a letter is believed only with an accompanying sign; when Launcelot receives a letter from his king, the handwriting and the seal are both needed to prove the letter genuine (1195.30). Similarly, Ban and Bors send a courier to Arthur so that they can answer his invitation ‘by

mowth and by wrytyng' (2.10-1), and when Mordred wishes to woo Guinevere he sends her 'lettirs and sondis [messengers]' (1228.25). The texts of letters are in the same style as speeches, so that the writers seem to envisage themselves standing and talking to the readers. Interestingly, composition by dictation is shown twice, one example coming from the 'Arthur' (37.32-38.5):

37.32 ...And
 there he tolde how Arthure and the two kynges had spedde
 at the grete batayle, and how hyt was endyd, and tolde the
 35 namys of every kynge and knyght of worship that was there.
 And so Bloyse wrote the batayle worde by worde as Merlion
 38.1 tolde hym, how hit began and by whom, and in lyke wyse
 how hit was ended and who had the worst. And all the
 batayles that were done in Arthurs dayes, Merlion dud hys
 mayster Bloyse wryte them. Also he dud wryte all the
 5 batayles that every worthy knyghte ded of Arthurs courte.

Significant here is the phrase 'worde by worde' (37.36), which seems reminiscent of oral composition written down. The oral tendency to concentrate tales about heavy figures is suggested in recording of the 'namys of every kynge of knyght of worship that was there' (37.35) and the 'batayles that every worthy knyghte ded' (38.5). The passage, though it tells of writing, is replete with repetition and rhythmically balanced phrases, which are oral features. The other example is the 'Grail' (1036.13-22) where Arthur gathers 'grete clerkes' (14) that they may 'cronycle of the hyghe adventures of the good knyghtes' (15-6) as told by Bors and Launcelot. Again here the twinned adjective-noun pairs suggest accumulative oral noetics. The books are 'put up in almeryes at Salysbury' (21-2), a significant hint to find in a manuscript in the keeping of Winchester cathedral. On some level the implication in both these passages is that these eyewitness accounts are the same as the text being heard. This chimes with Malory's placement of the story in the real historical past of England, as discussed in the previous section. This appropriation of tradition into history is oral. A paradoxical understanding of this process is revealed in the *explicit* of the tale on the next page, which reads, 'Thus endith the tale of the Sankgreal that was breffly drawy[n] oute of Freynshe – which ys a tale chronicled for one of the trewyst and of the holyest that ys in thys worlde...' (1037.8-11). While acknowledging French sources, Malory repeats the verb 'chronicle' from the passage just a few lines earlier, thus

claiming the authority of eye-witness accounts. This shows unconscious acceptance of the trustworthiness of tradition and suggests how real the world of discourse still was for audience and author, a realm which operated in parallel to and in partial superimposition on the lifeworld.

A common accident in medieval romance writing is the transposition of *matière* without adequate context and in service of different *sen*, so that ordinary material ends up seeming very fantastical and mysterious (Vinaver 1947a: 1268). The ‘Launcelot’ is a good example of this. Choosing three short sections from various French sources, Malory creates a new tale in which adventure is far more important than the courtly love prominent in the French, using the source material for his own ends. Thus the repeated appearance in this tale of damsels riding on white palfreys whose summons to adventure are immediately accepted and obeyed, stranded outside the courtly love framework, become simply one of the conventions, or laws, of Malory’s world. These arbitrary laws are characteristic of romance,²⁹ making the reader–romance relationship one of unusual dependency, for the audience relies on the author for everything, including the laws of what is possible and what is not (Beer 1970: 8). There are many examples of these laws in the *Morte*. A damsel arriving and asking for help is always believed (853). A knight/damsel arriving at court can ask any boon (294.3-10). Castles have customs (464.1-3) which are only accepted if not ‘shamefull’, that is, in opposition to the structures governing society (597.28), and have to be upheld, even by the knights who overthrow the original masters of the castle (507.23-6). Galahad has to travel alone (879). The marvellous, though decreased by Malory, is still present, and forms one of these unexplained laws of fantasy. For example, in a cluster from page 856, lettering suddenly appears on the Siege Perilous, stone floats on water and Launcelot knows the Grail quest will begin and knows the fate of he who tries the sword, all without any hint as to how these things happen. These fantasy laws can be used by evil characters; when Morgan le Fay tempts Launcelot and Tristram with promises of ‘dedys of worship’ (511.7-11) the formula of a damsel who appears promising heroic deeds and who is to be trusted is

²⁹ These laws arbitrarily operating in the real world are the first step towards the creation of the secondary worlds of fantasy, to use Tolkien’s phrase.

inverted. These fantasy laws seem even more fantastical for modern readers ignorant of romance conventions, and are paradoxically part of the attraction of romance literature. This freedom, fully unfettered by the completion of literacy's divorce from tradition, will eventually result in science-fiction and fantasy literature.

Malory's assumption of an aristocratic audience has an effect similar to his transposition of *matière*, with many points of chivalric etiquette simply taken for granted, and, because never explained, standing as arbitrary laws of causation and motivation in the tales. An example is found in 'King Arthur'; soon after his coronation, Arthur's kingdom is torn by civil war, and he calls in Ban and Bors from France to aid his campaign. In the French source, on hearing of their arrival Arthur proclaims a great tournament, as a ruse to hide the fact that the kings have actually come to fight in the war, and as an appropriate gesture of welcome for such noble and chivalrous allies. These reasons are important, because otherwise holding a tournament in the middle of a war would seem a suicidally extravagant gesture (Vinaver 1947a: 1287). Malory omits any reference to these explanations, and yet presents the tournament as something ordinary and expected. As a formulaic event in romance literature, the tournament becomes simply a signal of conventionality, and the sudden declaration of tournaments for no apparent reason another of the laws of Malory's world. Other chivalric laws include: tournaments have to be attended or honour is lost (262); one knight may require assistance of another in pursuing a quest (548.9); no member of the Round Table may fight another knowingly (546.27-8); a knight has a right to demand by the Order of Knighthood his opponent's name and knightly history (399.21-3); a request made by 'the hyghe Order of Knyghthode' (636.25, 637.4) is the most binding charge of all; a knight demanding a joust cannot be refused (546). These laws seem the only way to explain episodes such as 545.30-6.37, where Ywain arrives in Cornwall and demands a joust, and having overthrown two opponents of Cornwall refuses to joust with Gaherys, since as knights of the Round Table they have sworn never to fight others of the fellowship wittingly. The incident teaches a point of knightly honour and its structure depends on romance laws: on the impossibility of refusing a demand to joust, on the cowardly reputation

of Cornish knights, on the feudal responsibility to honour one's lord (as Dynas agrees to fight 'for love' of his lord, Mark). To a modern audience the narrative seems arbitrary and motivations contrived, because they depend on a shared tradition of laws and values we are too distant, and too literate, to naturally absorb.

The text hinges on themes integrally associated with the lifeworld of Malory's aristocratic audience, particularly the social conventions of knighthood. It provides a space where these conventions can be reflected on and questioned, which is unusual for a romance (Finlayson 1992: 134). The residual orality of the work has retained this function of epic, and also makes the working of this function so unconscious. The few passages which comment on the story are difficult to interpret, careless and oblique (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 64). As narrator Malory depends on his audience identifying with the story and its values. When he tells us that when slaying Gareth and Gaherys 'in very trouth sir Launcelot saw them [nat]' (1178.2), the success of his story, our acceptance of Launcelot as the ideal, depends on our acceptance of the veracity and nobility of the narrator. The text requires total investment, and cannot sustain irony on any level. Launcelot's farewell speech (1201.9-22) reveals the core of Malory's understanding of epic as a tale of long ago which teaches us how to accept the sufferings of life nobly. Malory is not interested in the various available 'explanations' for the tragic end of the Round Table, such as the wheel of fortune, or punishment because of the failure of the Grail quest, but rather he sees it as a human tragedy, a clash of human loyalties. This is fundamentally where Malory is epic rather than romance, for epic is concerned with collision of character and circumstance while romance concentrates on emotion itself or the nature of the predicament (Finlayson 1992: 130). This is epic's coping quality, accepting life as it is, just making it liveable.

3.5. Epithetic identification

In oral tales epithetic identification is necessary for 'disambiguation' of classes or individuals, as it helps to clear the confusion produced by other oral characteristics such as unclear

pronominal reference, and fits characters into their correct place in the context of traditional story, thus enabling the audience to follow the narrative clearly. In Malory this disambiguation functions on several levels: names themselves, epithets, associated formulae and distinguishing phrases. In 91.15-8, for example, the words Merlin writes on Balin's tomb function on all these levels: 'here lyeth Balyn le Saveage that was the knyght with the two swerdes and he that smote the dolorous stroke.' His name, Balin, is linked by alliteration with that of his brother, Balan; his epithet, le Sauvage, is formulaic (as will be discussed below); and a bizarre characteristic, his two swords, and his most famous deed, the Dolorous Stroke, distinguish him, linking him to his reputation in tradition. The functionings of these levels of naming are similar, so they will not be discussed separately.

Malory's narrative assumes an audience familiar with tradition. For example, in 385.2-3 Tristram is cared for by the king's daughter, a 'noble surgeon', and then suddenly three lines later (385.6-7) he is described as falling in love with 'la Beale Isode'. Only the traditional name and epithet carrying within them the identification of Isode as the daughter of the King of Ireland explain that Tristram's nurse and love is the same person. A similar narrative sequence occurs in the 'Arthur'. The king is awaiting a fresh horse by a well and sees the Questing Beast. Shortly thereafter a knight arrives, who says he seeks the beast. Arthur's horse arriving at this moment, the strange knight insists on taking it, the better to follow the Beast. Only now does Malory insert an aside not in his source, explaining that this insistent knight is King Pellinor, and indicating that after Pellinor Palomides will follow the Questing Beast. Malory's confirmation of the name of the knight, familiar in tradition, is a concession to the hermeneutics of vocality. The heavy oral residue of this tradition is shown by the formula 'that men call' often used to introduce a name, as when Dame Linet in the 'Gareth' is introduced as 'the damesell Lyonette that som men calle the damesell Savyage' (357.5-6). This tradition extends outside the tales, and the functioning of disambiguating devices depends on it. The Questing Beast named above is an example of such a device (484.4-11); its origins or slaying are never

recounted, yet it defines first King Pellinore and then Sir Palomides.³⁰ Malory also uses epithets skilfully to make his adaptation of *matière* acceptable to his audience. An important example of this is the character of Launcelot, who is marginal in many of Malory's sources but the main hero of the *Morte*. In 388.25 he is named as 'sir Launcelot that wan the Dolorous Garde'; the distinguishing phrase refers to his first major exploit as a knight, well-known in tradition (Vinaver 1947a: 1447), so that Malory's additions to tradition are built on his audience's prior associations with Launcelot.³¹

So, drawing on traditional associations Malory's names have to be followed by a listening audience. The vocality of his text is particularly clear in the matter of pronominal and nominal reference. For example, in the Questing Beast passage above (43.9-22) Arthur and Pellinore are arguing over the horse, and Malory's habit of referring to them both as 'the kyng' leads to acute hermeneutical difficulties. A similar situation is seen in 490.7-22, where the wicked lady Aunowre kidnaps Arthur and attempts to seduce him; in the long passage that follows both this lady and the king's wife are referred to as 'she', resulting in similar confusion. Pronoun use is a literate development, with oral discourse tending to repeat the key noun; even Chaucer shows an oral pattern in this respect (Field 1971: 29).³² Often Malory does repeat a name rather than use the pronoun of his source, as in 205.16 where Sir Howell's name is repeated (Vinaver 1947a: 1373). So Malory shows literate development in his attempts to use pronouns, but heavy oral residue in the clumsiness of these attempts. His literacy also makes him aware of this problem, as when several times he clears up an unclear pronominal reference immediately after making it; Arthur swears by his 'fadirs soule Uther!' (48.27), for example, and Merlin says to the king, 'ye may nat leve hit so, thys adventure, so lyghtly' (103.9-10).

³⁰ In 590.18-21 Palomides himself uses his quest for the Beast as a calling card, a disambiguating feature linking his physical self with his reputation.

³¹ In the 'Tristram' Launcelot does not play a major role, but his presence pervades Malory's version of the tale (the reputations of both Tristram and Launcelot are enhanced by each other's reflected glory).

³² In *Beowulf* of course varied kennings take the place of pronouns.

On the level of names, disambiguation depends on traditional associations. For example, Sir Kay's reputation for having a wicked tongue is immediately associated with his name (488.14-21). Malory's names appear to be denotary in their entirety. This is obvious in his use of French names without translating them, suggesting that a name with its epithets, such as 'sir Tor le Fyze de Vaysshoure' (489.3), functions as a unit rather than in the meaning of each constituent. Where Malory means a name to be understood he translates it (Field 1971: 63). In 644.26-33 two unfamiliar epithets are explained, suggesting that Malory has an awareness of the origin of distinguishing phrases and epithets, and an oral understanding of their function in linking people to their lifeworld. This awareness lies behind the Tramtrist episode (384.26), where to disguise himself Tristram reverses the elements of his name without changing its meaning. After this point up to 391.6, where Tristram's true identity is revealed, the narrator shows a tendency to call him Tramtryst, suggesting an oral identification of name with person rather than a literate conception of name as label (Ong 1982: 33). In 39.20 Arthur first sees his future wife, and she is called 'queene Gwenyvere', though as yet she is only 'the kyngis daughter of the londe of Camylarde'. Similarly, in 'Arthur and Lucius' Gawain is called 'sir Gawayne' although he is not yet a knight (232.23). This clearly suggests an oral cast of thought, with the entire name a signal of conventionality enabling a listening audience to correctly place these characters within the framework of tradition.

This link between name and tradition functions both positively and negatively, sometimes disambiguating and sometimes increasing confusion. For example, a disambiguating phrase, 'Kay's fadir' is added to plain 'sir Ector' (23.4), to avoid possible confusion with sir Ector de Marys. Traditional associations must lie behind this addition, otherwise Sir Ector the guardian of Arthur, who was introduced just a few pages ago, would need no disambiguation. Often in the tales, lists of names link the central characters of episodes with the tradition as a whole, as on page 162 where a list of the six knights who ever overcame Gawain includes Launcelot, Tristram and Percival, three of the most famous knights. However, the aggregative cast of oral thought revealed in this use of names sometimes leads to Malory's own confusion, as when

Galahad acquires the epithet 'Haute Prince' because of his name's similarity to Galehaut the Haute Prince (860.11). It also occasionally overpowers the narrative, as on pages 1149-50 for example, where the name of Sir Bellynger, son of Alexander the Orphan (1149.25), suggests the story of his father's slaying by King Mark (1149.25-7), which in turn suggests King Tristram's slaying by Mark (1149.28-33) and Lamerok's by Gawain (1149.33-5), before the story returns to Bellynger's slaying of Mark (1150.1-2) and to the tale of Sir Urry, with a detour to the death of Isode (1150.3-4).

Another distinctly oral characteristic of Malory's is his dislike for anonymity, reflecting the oral tendency to embody abstract concepts in individual characters. Most importantly, the concept of knightliness is embodied in a series of concrete characters. Malory tends to name knights as soon as they appear, whereas his sources often keep identities mysterious to build tension. For example, in 63.3 Balyn is named immediately (Vinaver 1947a: 1300). This remains Malory's practice even though it sometimes interferes with the story, as when the use of Tristram's name in Launcelot's proclamation (534.1), rather than his heraldic title 'Knight with the Black Shield' as in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1465), renders pointless the subsequent quest to find the identity of the knight named in the proclamation (538-9). However, on one occasion Malory names an anonymous knight in an aside to the audience (598.6), which is a practical measure to help a listening audience keep track of the story, but which also suggests a degree of separation from the narrative impossible for an oral poet. Sometimes the addition of names gives the story emotional intensity and tragic inevitability, as when the people Balin passes on his way from the castle of King Pellam reproach him by name for the Dolorous Stroke; 'A, Balyn!' they say (86.11), whereas in the source they just call him 'knight' (Vinaver 1947a: 1313). The naming of Tristram's devoted squire, Governayle (380.17), is a possible remnant of the theme of epic friendship, such as that Achilles and Patroclus shared. Throughout the text also Malory gives names to characters anonymous in his sources (e.g. 104.23, 25-6, 109.31-3, 119.19-21, 208.17, 565.23, 1167.22 and 1242.7-8), no matter how minor they are. For example, 'a kynge' in the source becomes 'a kyng of Etyopé' (221.30) in the *Morte*. The names Malory coins sometimes

come from surrounding words in the source, for example 270.12 (Vinaver 1947a: 1411), or more often are conventional, with Gallic names and formulaic epithets such as ‘of the Illes/Lands’ or ‘le Saveage’. Examples include ‘sir Vaynes’, ‘Harvis le Marchis’ and ‘Peryne de la Mountayne’ (646. 31-3). In ‘Arthur and Lucius’ the names tend to alliterate, so that ‘sir Bedwere the bolde’ (212.11) or ‘sir Kay the kene’ (216.13-4) have stereotypical epithets added to their names so they balance like ‘sir Cadour of Cornuayle’ (212.7) or ‘sir Edolf and sir Edwarde’ (212.23). The most famous example of an alliterating epithet is of course Launcelot du Lake.

An example of Malory’s disambiguation comes from the ‘Arthur’, where two knights, Sir Gryfflet and Sir Ladynas, are fighting. They are named (23.13-4) and then called the ‘Frensh knyght and Englysh knyght’ (16-7), without its being made clear which is which. However, a little earlier in the surrounding text, Gryfflet’s lineage is given in a list of English knights (22.31), and a little later he is associated with Sir Lucas the Butler (23.19), who is a traditional figure associated with the Round Table, and finally in the next episode Ladynas is named as one of a pair of French knights (23.26). This type of tapestry effect builds up disambiguation for a listening audience.

In the interests of hermeneutics, Malory also tends to keep his cast small. He keeps to familiar names or titles, such as when a ‘marchall of Mowne’ in the source becomes ‘marchall of Rome’ (209.8) (Vinaver 1947a: 1375) or when an unknown damsel becomes Brangwayne (513.11-2) (Vinaver 1947a: 1463). This leads to repetition, and confusion of character, as for example when the good knight fought for by Accolon in ‘Arthur and Accolon’ (138.28) is given the same name, ‘Outelake of Wentelonde’, as the cowardly knight defeated by Pellinor in 115.8-9. One character, the ‘Browne Knyght Wythoute Pyté’, is killed in the ‘Gareth’ (355.14-24) before he appears as a villain, ‘Breunis saunce Pyté’, in the ‘Tristram’ stories (Vinaver 1947a: 1430). That an audience would allow such lapses suggests that the conventional sound of the names is what is required, in such minor characters, to link the story to the wider tradition.

As do *Beowulf*'s kennings, Malory's names reflect society's structures. The most common and most important of these is family bonds. The formulaic epithets mentioned above most commonly tell of the character's origin, even if it is conventional and unlocalised, such as 'de les Ylyes' (212.10) or 'of the Waste Londis' (1242.8). Characters in the stories show the same concern for identification; Palomides introduces himself by name, kin and descent (596.32-4), and Gawain greets a knight saying, 'I knowe full well thy modir. In Ingelonde was thou borne' (210.9-10). Kinship is also used in names to connect characters with the wider tradition, as when King Angwysch is called father of 'La Beall Isode' (503.35-6) rather than 'quene Isode' (as she is in the rest of the speech 29, 32), since her conventional title has more powerful associations with tradition, thus disambiguating him more surely. Kinship is also unaffected by a character's moral worth, in true oral fashion, as when in 396.17-9 Sir Bleoberis is called 'the good knyghte sir Bleoberys de Ganys, brother unto sir Blamore de Ganys and nye cosine unto the good knyght syr Launcelot de Lake', even though he is about to steal away a married woman. Thus Malory's naming is very oral, localising characters within the tradition and within the lifeworld of the audience, but it also reveals literate development; some names show hints of national consciousness, as when Marhalt is called 'the noble knyght sir Marhalt of Irelande' (380.15) or English knights become 'oure noble knyghtes of mery Ingelonde' (209.13).³³ Malory's use of lineage in disambiguation shows the effects of oral aggregative thought, for example when the mention of King Pellinor in the account of the departure of Sir Tristram from Camelot leads to a sudden genealogy of the sons of Pellinor (610.21-26), inserted apparently with no regard for narrative flow. However, this digression provides links backwards to the revenge of Gawain and his brethren, and forwards to the dubbing of Sir Percival, links vital in vocality if an audience is to follow a complex story.

Apart from lineage, names reflect rank in the feudal society of fifteenth-century England. Thus epithets such as 'lady', 'kyng' and 'queen' reflect hereditary position, while 'sir', 'le Butler' or 'le Seneschal' suggest acquired rank. The word 'damsel' seems to carry more significance than

³³ The nationalism is literate, but note the oral aggregative formula, 'mery Ingelonde'.

merely 'an unmarried woman', functioning more as a doorway to the space of romance adventure. Names then reflect a cluster of essential *comitatus* virtues: prowess, fame and allegiance. Prowess is reflected in the many formulaic epithets linked to the names of knights, such as 'a myghty man of men' (41.10) or 'a clene man of armys' (212.8). Fame can be linked with deeds of prowess, as the example of 'sir Launcelot that wan the Dolorous Garde' (388.25) mentioned above shows, or can arise out of the unusual or bizarre, for example Balin's title of 'the Knyght with the Two Swerdis' (75.4), or 'La Cote Male Tayle' of the 'Tristram'. As Ong points out, this use of the bizarre is highly oral (1982: 70). In 545.31-2 Malory fuses two characters from the source into one person, with two names: 'sir Uwayne le Fyze de Roy Urayne (and som called hym sir Uwayne le Blaunche Maynes)' (Vinaver 1947a: 1468). The names disambiguate by kinship and by bizarre personal appearance, and both are bound by internal rhyme. Often fame and lineage are combined in names, with knights linked to their illustrious forebears. Sir Priamus declares his descent from the two heroic pagans and the two heroic Jews mentioned in Caxton's preface (231.9-22), while Launcelot and Galahad can trace their lineage back to Jesus Christ (865.9-10). Allegiance results in such epithets as 'a knyght of the Table Ro[un]de' (1242.20-1) or 'the Quenys Knyghtes' (1121.16-7, 21, 26-7). Women's names reflect social structures appropriate to their place in society, thus lineage and birthplace, fame (as men are famed for prowess, women are famed for beauty and purity) and allegiance. The epithets used for Elaine of Astolat reflect some of these: she is called 'fayre', 'le Blanke', 'mayden' and 'of Astolat' (e.g. 1081.23, 26, 1082.28, 1085.15, 19, 1089.6 and 1089.10). In another example, the Lady of the Lake is 'the Lady of the Lake, that was allwayes fryndely to kynge Arthure ... thys Lady of the Lake, that hyght Nynyve' (490.25-8), disambiguated by her title, then her allegiance and then her name. Sometimes epithets are purely descriptive, but reveal the aggregative cast of Malory's thought, such as 'sir Barnarde, the olde barowne, and at hys doughtir, the fayre mayden' (1068.33-4).

Apart from reflecting permanent societal structures, names are also added to suit narrative needs, helping the audience to follow character and plot. For example, the nameless damsel with

whom La Cote Male Tayle has been travelling is suddenly called 'the damesell Maledysaunte' (463.10), which seems to derive from her habit of chiding her escort. Then, when she relents, her name is changed to 'the Damesell Byeau-Pansaunte' (471.25-6). Inaccuracies are pardonable if they help disambiguate characters, such as when the king of Ireland, in earlier books the brother-in-law, is now 'fadir unto the good knyght sir Marhalte that sir Trystram slew' (729.27-9). Another important but subtle effect of names is to contribute to the separation of the tale into sections that can be told individually, as all oral tales are. An example of this is the use of Dinadan's name in the 'King Mark' section of the 'Tristram'. Though he has appeared in earlier sections Dinadan is introduced in 580.21 as if he is a new character, with 'than cam there a knyght that was called sir Dynadan'.

Another oral characteristic still lingering is the naming of objects, for example 'the name of the swerde ys the Swerde with the Straunge Gurdyls, and the s[h]eeth, Mevear of Blood' (995.15-16). Gawain's sword is Galantyne, and in 'Arthur and Lucius' it is described as a 'bowerly brond that bright semed' (208.1), a phrase whose alliteration and archaic diction suggest a direct remnant from Anglo-Saxon heroic verse. Though the sword no longer has a glorious history of its own, as an epic sword has, it does 'many wondrys' (210.20). This characteristic is however disappearing; in 513.9 Tristram's horse is suddenly named for the first time, though the animal 'had ben hys horse many yerys' (513.10). Arthur's sword Excalibur appears, of course, an emblem of his position in the tradition. Its name is given and translated in 65.17-20. This emblematic function of objects has developed into heraldry, where a knight's shield identifies him. 387.25-6 gives a practical example of how heraldry works, with Palomides at once himself and 'The Knight with the Black Shield'. However, heraldry is a visual sign system, and in the flow of a vocal text often has to be explained, as in 751.28-31 and 735.18-23, where the identities of characters, obvious by their heraldry, are then confirmed by the narrator naming them directly to the audience.

Overall then, the use of names reveals a mind partly oral and partly literate. The explicit added at the beginning and end of the tales are examples of *copia*, but also serve to disambiguate the tales themselves, perhaps even more for a reader picking up the text than for a listening audience. Tristram, mad, is discovered and described by the king's guards, who see 'a fayre naked man' (501.1); the description is from the guards' point-of-view. Tristram has been called 'naked' throughout this section of the tale, so the identification is simple for a listening audience, yet the indefinite article and the lack of disambiguation make this the beginnings of a literate device. The use of names as labels, which is a literate understanding (Ong 1982: 33), is seen in the assigning of places on the Round Table by writing the name of a knight over each seat, yet together with this occurs the oral naming of an object, the Siege Perilous, and its supernatural threat. In a strange way the loosening of the ties between discourse and lifeworld, discussed in the previous section, have made the names of characters more potent, in that the tradition they activate is an idealised version of the real world. Launcelot is the 'moste noble knyght of the worlde' (740.1), 'the floure of knyghthode' (791.27), 'floure of all noble knyghtes' (1231.8), the formulaic epithets reflecting his idealised heavy character. The mere names of the major knights become signposts to moral and ethical high-ground, particularly those of 'sir Trystram othir sir Launcelot other ellys sir Lameroke the good knyght' (639.29), which tend to form a formulaic cluster used as a yardstick to measure the worth of a knight.

3.6. Heavy characters

Malory still keeps to oral heavy figures, with heroes who are noble, strong, valorous and successful beyond the average man. As in oral poetry too, the average man does not make a significant appearance in the *Morte*, which presents a drastically simplified picture of the world, as mentioned in section 3.4. As in *Beowulf*, we see mostly the upper strata of society, and the middle or lower classes if present at all receive summary treatment; in the episode of the Knight of the Cart, Launcelot kills the owner of the cart without remorse (1126). Malory as narrator shows himself noble, describing hunting knowledgably and enthusiastically several times (Field

1971: 104).³⁴ In a further simplification we only see these aristocratic characters as adults, with very few old people and almost no infants or children appearing in the tales, and knights staying in the prime of life as their sons grow to that same age (Bradbrook 1958: 14). Unlike primary oral epic, however, this simplification in Malory does not serve a primarily mnemonic role. This is embodied in the decreased importance of the wise old man type figure, epitomised by Hroðgar in *Beowulf*, who symbolises remembered lore. He is replaced in the *Morte* by the younger warrior figure, the knight errant, who symbolises not only the adaptation and incorporation of new knowledge made possible by writing but also the exploration of abstract concepts allowed by this literate freedom. In romance the didacticism of epic has passed inward to the 'delineation and definition of noble qualities', seeking 'the ethical dimension or justifying moral significance of chivalric prowess' (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 4).³⁵ Malory explores the nature of chivalry in the *Morte*, and this exploration within his hybrid state of oral-literacy profoundly shapes his characters.

For the most part, the figures of the *Morte* are stereotyped. Most characters are good, with a few villains including Kay, Mark, Mordred and minor characters such as Breuntz sans Pitié (Bradbrook 1958: 26). Merlin is a figure of reason on 'a grete blacke horse' (36.37). God is 'an olde man... with a company of angels' (928.29-30). Figures like Sir Gawain and the Red Knight of the Red Land (321.1-2), whose strength waxes and wanes with the sun, are the last remaining traces of the mythical roots of the characters.³⁶ Overall too, the knights resemble the emotionally conscious characters of orality; they show a combination of violence and innocence 'presumably taken for granted by Malory and his contemporaries' (Bradbrook 1958: 27). This is

³⁴ Malory's style in presenting the yeomen, labourers, cowherds, carters, sailors, fishermen or villagers who appear in the tales also reveals his limitations as a writer; these characters show no difference in speech patterns to the knightly characters (Field 1971: 104). This is a telltale trace of oral residue, revealing the narrative's closeness to the lifeworld and discourse of the aristocratic author and audience. This is despite the fact that Malory mentions 'the goodly tearmys that jantylnen have and use and shall do unto the Day of Dome' (375.24-6), suggesting he was aware of class distinctions in speech (Field 1971: 103).

³⁵ This is why romance often follows the development and education of a hero (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 5), seen in Malory's 'Arthur', 'Lancelot' and 'Gareth', as well as several episodes in the 'Tristram'.

³⁶ They remain characters, however, never degenerating into mouthpieces (Field 1971: 147) or allegorical figures.

seen in the knights' response when Arthur asks them for advice: 'they coude no council gyve, but said they were bygge ynough' (19.33-4). Tristram is a type figure. He is several times hailed, once even by Arthur himself (571.27-32), as the ideal, adept at hunting, hawking and music as well as fighting. In the episode where the army of Sessoyne besieges Tintagel (618-26), Tristram is a real epic hero fighting for his country's deliverance. Though much is made of his distinctive excellence, in action he is indistinguishable from other knights. Tristram is the archetypal oral heavy character, the type of the perfect aristocrat, yet advancing literacy has left Malory unable to let his ideal stand alone; in 375.12-29 after Tristram's qualities are listed, a direct authorial commendation makes explicit their didactic function. Malory as author is acquiring literate distance from his characters rather than the identification of *mimesis*.

This hint of literacy is reinforced by another, more pervasive literate trend. Malory's characters have a 'kind of depth and stability,' a more definite identity 'defined by their existence in a mutual relationship to each other' (Bradbrook 1958: 32-3), than do the characters of primary oral epic. The half-dozen or so main figures show unity of character through the stories, with the sequence of the tales as we have them keeping the lives of these main characters in order (Brewer in Bennett 1965: 45). This stability is a prerequisite for early efforts to develop roundedness of character, and reflects a more fundamental shift from the hero as representative of society, in oral epic, to the hero as individual, in romance. In oral epic the hero is his society's victim; he offers his life so that they may live. He occupies a strange liminal position, vital to his society and yet not part of it, for his function in society is to die (Redfield 1975: 124). The focus is very much on the fate of society, and so an epic hero's enemies are usually the heroes of other societies. In romance the hero fights for himself, for his position in society. Human society has evolved into a more stable, centralised organisation, centring on the hereditary monarchy (Diamond 1998: 268). (This hierarchical system is reflected in the formula 'kings, princes, dukes, earls, barons and knights' (653.25-6), which stands for society as a whole.) What is at stake is no longer the survival of a people. The hero struggles with societal structure and his role as a knight, on one hand, and his personal desires as an individual human

being on the other (Finlayson 1992: 129). ‘Romance uses a single hero and ideologises his aggressive nature by making him fight ogres, oppressors of ladies and only incognito lets him fight his brother knights, other property hunters’ (Knight 1986: 84). This is a development beyond the possibilities of oral literature, since it requires a concentration on the individual that contradicts the essential identification of *mimesis*. This literate development makes possible the unifying project of the tales, which is Malory’s rejection of the chivalry in his French sources and his evolution of his own understanding (Bradbrook 1958: 15).

Literate though the project of the *Morte* may be, it uses other characteristically oral techniques, particularly parallels and contrasts. The tale of Launcelot and Guinevere, a study in the confrontation of romantic love and knightly loyalty, is paralleled by that of Tristram and Isode (verbal echoes include the phrase ‘in right and in wrong’ e.g. 391.33) and more indistinctly by that of Lamerok and the Queen of Orkney. In an episode from the ‘Tristram’ (780.14-17), where in the source Tristram does not recognise Palomides or understand his love song for Isode (Vinaver 1947a: 1510), Malory makes Tristram overhear Palomides, causing enmity between the two knights. This brings the confrontation between knightly loyalty and romantic love to the foreground, and strengthens the parallel with the Launcelot-Guinevere story. Parallelism also strengthens the idealisation of Launcelot, who is adored first by Sir Lavayne and his sister, the Fair Maid of Astolat (1068), and then by Sir Urry and his sister (1151). Launcelot’s healing of Sir Meliot (282.1-5) parallels Galahad’s healing of the Maimed King (1031.8-13); in both cases blood and a weapon accomplish the miraculous cure. These episodes are echoed without these details in Launcelot’s healing of Sir Urry (1152.26-32). While advancing both knights as ideals, these episodes also hint back to the ritual and magical roots of the tales, and testify to a belief in the healing power of a king’s touch that endured into the seventeenth century. Contrasts are also important. In the final battles around Benwick (1191), Gawain takes measures to find and kill Launcelot, and Launcelot to spare Gawain; the contrast again idealises Launcelot. The worthiness of Arthur is emphasised by comparison with Mark of Cornwall. While Arthur is a mirror of chivalry, as will be explored below, Malory adds details such as Mark’s oath to be a

friend to Tristram as well as to all errant knights (549.25-6) (Vinaver 1947a: 1468) thus making the king a perjurer as well as a coward. Mark is also allied with the evil characters of the tales, particularly Morgan le Fay and Breunis Sans Pitié (638.24-9).

Malory's ladies also tend towards being oral heavy figures, all queens or gentlewomen with castles at their disposal, and type figures, such as Isode the ideal queen of whom it is said, 'she is pyerles of all ladyes; for to speake of her beauté, bounté, and myrthe, and of hir goodness, we sawe never hir macche as far as we have ryddyn and gone' (764.3-7). As romance women, however, they tend to assume a larger role (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 5) than the stereotypical mentions in primary oral poetry, though a queen's duties to be 'large and fre of hir goodis to all good knyghtes, and... bownteuous...of hir gyffti[s] and her good grace' (1054.9-10) are the same as in *Beowulf*. As will be explored in Malory's heroes below, however, his heroines show the beginnings of roundedness in individual characteristics: Isode is careful, insisting Tristram carry arms when he goes hunting alone (683.6-10) which is not in the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1498), and watching over his reputation (839.28-840.13); Guinevere is proud, and occasionally unreasonable; Ettard is brazen and capricious; and Elaine of Astolat is transparently honest.

A further oral tendency in Malory's characterisation is the ability of his characters to change from hero to villain according to narrative need. For example, in 488.18-21 Tristram names Kay as 'the shamefullst knyght of your tunge that now ys lyvyng' (note the alternate use of the 'bravest now living' formula), yet in 549.21 Kay is a good knight, fighting valiantly for the rights of Tristram against his traitorous cousin Andred. This flexibility is often linked to the underlying lesson of the story, as in the Arthur and Accolon episode where the adulterer Accolon shows the importance of liege loyalty by remaining faithful to his lord, King Urience, even though he is Accolon's lover's husband (140.20-5). This oral epic sensibility is also seen throughout the text in the many characters whose allegiance makes them opposed to Arthur and the Round Table but who are nevertheless good knights, such as Sir Bryan de Les Iles, described as 'a noble man and a grete enemy to kynge Arthure' (469.26-7).

On this base of oral flat characterisation, then, Malory uses various methods to bring light and shade to some main characters. Firstly, he introduces individual details, some which also serve narrative ends, such as Gawain's passion for fruit (1048.30), some appropriate to the specific tale, such as Galahad's tendency to religious one-liners in the 'Grail' (e.g. 886.34) and some with no apparent purpose, such as Launcelot's habit of tying his horse to things (e.g. 271.24-5 a ring in the wall, 280.4-5 a little gate). Secondly, while Malory does not attempt to imitate accent or dialect as part of dialogue (Field 1971: 119), speeches are the major method of revealing character (Field 1971: 103). The comparative literacy of these characters is highlighted by the contrast between narration, where thoughts and feelings of characters are expressed in standard formulae ('was passyng wrothe' and so on), and speeches, which show subtle understanding of motive and feeling (Field 1971: 103). This contrast is also reflected in the syntax of Malory's dialogue, which uses the appositive competently e.g. 1020.13 (Field 1971: 129) unlike the parataxis of the narrative. Particularly striking are moments when 'a sudden total intuition of how the characters feel and how they would act in a certain time and place' (Field 1971: 136), something only possible for rounded individual characters, makes the expressed emotions strikingly apt to the situation and history of the character speaking (Field 1971: 135). For example, in 1195.24 the Bishop of Rochester refers to the Pope's 'worship' and his own 'poor honesty', immediately creating an impression of unctuousness (Field 1971: 139). An illuminating fact about this verbal characterisation in Malory is that it occurs most often in characters who are not knights (Field 1971: 136). Perhaps this is because knights are the heavy characters carrying the didactic and adaptive function of the text and so are still most influenced by oral residue. Lastly, Malory's tendency to cut out magic in favour of realism also contributes to more detailed characters. For example, rather than just accepting the angelic voices they hear, as simpler romance heroes would do, Ector and Gawain check with each other that they have actually heard the same thing (943.17-18). Several times Malory adds mercenary motives for a villain's actions (e.g. 118.10, 499.3-2). His monsters too tend to be simply monsters, not the distorted humans of *Beowulf*, but he cuts them out in favour of more realistic human villains, such as King Mark, who begin to develop into rounded characters.

One knight who becomes a rounded character is Launcelot. Throughout, and especially in the earlier books, Malory enlarges the importance of this character. Whereas in the sources Launcelot is the champion of courtesy, Malory makes him a largely martial/heroic figure, more suited to the English tendency to make Arthurian legend epic (Vinaver 1947a:1363-4), and also insists on rehabilitating him, omitting damaging details and vaunting his past greatness (Vinaver 1947a: 1523). As a carrier of vital societal structuring systems, Launcelot has to be an ideal figure. For example, where in the source Launcelot accepts, for his own gain, an offer of allegiance from the prisoners of a castle he has won in single combat, in Malory he returns the castle to its original owner, and its treasure to the prisoners (272.20-26) (Vinaver 1947a: 1413). He demonstrates the heroic characteristics of graciousness and generosity. Launcelot's treatment of women is also ideal, pointed by his avoidance of the disrespectful pronoun 'thou' when talking to a woman, even Phelot's wife, who helps her husband to trap him (Field 1971: 106). Only once, and under extreme stress, does he call a woman 'thou', and that is when he wakes from his enchanted sleep beside Elaine of Corbenic (795.27-8). Launcelot's status as role-model is strengthened by Malory's stylistic habit of putting praise for him in the mouths of other characters (220.22-4 the populace, 742.3-5 and 745.15-25 Tristram, another ideal knight).³⁷ This oral idealisation of Launcelot gives way, however, to more literate tendencies, resulting often in a strange hybrid presentation of his character. For example, Launcelot's actions on occasion suggest the *beserker* rather than an intellectually self-conscious character, as when in the 'Tristram' he 'hylde allwayes the stowre lyke harde, as a man araged that toke none hede to hymself' (533.20-1).³⁸ This is surely a remnant of Havelock's imaginatively conscious oral hero, yet Launcelot's final dilemma in this episode, whether or not to accept the prize for the tournament which he thinks Tristram deserves (533.35-534.3), is very much that of an intellectually self-conscious man. Similarly, Launcelot's speech to Guinevere, "Madame," seyde sir Launcelot, 'I shall nat fayle you, but I shall be redy at youre commaundement'

³⁷ The first and last are Malory's additions (Vinaver 1947a: 1382, 1506).

³⁸ Tristram (483.4-9) and Arthur (1192.9-10) also have these uncharacteristic moments of unforgiving ferocity. Indeed, throughout the siege of Benwick Arthur acts more like the emotionally conscious Achilles bent on vengeance than the intellectually self-conscious Launcelot.

(804.12-3) is built of formulaic military phrases, but is actually his pledge to visit her chamber that night, a courtly intrigue characteristic of more literate romance. Often too, Launcelot's adherence to *comitatus* principles is presented as conscious and willed. His unconscious (oral) dependence on these values is shown by such instances as 418.25, where evidence that Tristram's fame matches his makes Launcelot feel 'hevy', yet Malory's insert that when Tristram leaves Mark for love of Isode Launcelot is 'passyng wrothe' with him for allowing romantic love to overpower loyalty to a liege lord (195.11-3) suggests an intellectual understanding of duty as a matter of will.

These literate hints of Launcelot's character become stronger in the last three tales, as Malory's narrative skill develops. Indeed, this development of Launcelot's character binds these tales into a unit, and through it Malory 'so develops the sense of personal choice in his characters that the conception of Fate becomes almost superfluous' (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 101). This element of choice in the tragic ending of an epic tale is impossible in oral thinking. At the beginning of the Grail Quest Launcelot in self-awareness can state, 'I know well I was never none of the beste' (863.28-9). This self-awareness enables him to come to an agonising moment of self-examination, where he explores his weakness (in the physical world he never failed in any fight right or wrong) and realises his sinful state (896.1-7). To this picture of self-conscious human agony Malory adds a still more human detail: 'So thus he sorrowed tyll hit was day, and harde the fowlys singe; than somewhat he was comforted' (896.10-11). In the end, after he heals Sir Urry, Launcelot's unbearable awareness of the discrepancy between his sinful nature and his reputation causes him to weep 'as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn' (1152.36); literate self-consciousness overpowers the *comitatus* desire for renown.

This unfolding presentation of Launcelot as a man conscious of his duty, and of his struggles to fulfil it, is vital to the tragedy of the final tales, where his love for the queen finally overpowers all other claims and he lives just to fight for her, right or wrong (1052.9). On an oral didactic level the final two tales explore an inherent problem in the trial-by-combat system – because

Launcelot is the greatest fighter he can never be proved wrong. As mentioned in section 3.4, Malory is not disowning the system but rather exploring its weaknesses from the inside. Launcelot's agonised awareness of the conflict between his two loyalties, a conflict almost entirely Malory's own invention (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 20), is evidenced in the forbearance he shows Gawain (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 97-9). This forbearance lies behind a subtle vocal difference, which would gradually build an emotional impression for a listening audience; while in the final section Gawain uses the contemptuous 'thou' to Launcelot until the end, when he forgives him, Launcelot always addresses Gawain as 'you' (Field 1971: 107). Launcelot's final important speech, over the grave of Arthur and Guinevere, encapsulates his position as an intelligently self-conscious character living by a heavily oral code. He says (1256),

28 '...but my sorow may never
 have ende. For what I remember of hir beaulté and of hir
 30 noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr, so
 what I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, truly
 myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. Also
 whan I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule
 and my pryde that they were bothe layed full owe, that were
 35 pereles that ever was lvyng of Cristen people, wyt you wel,'
 sayde syr Launcelot, 'this remembred, of their kyndenes and
 myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not
 susteyne myself.' So the Frensshe book maketh mencyon.

Launcelot mourns abstract qualities, impossible for an oral mind, as is his examination of conscience, yet these qualities (nobility, generosity) are rooted in *comitatus* loyalty and embodied in illustrious 'heavy' characters. Malory's appeal to the authority of his source is similarly hybrid, satisfying conservative oral noetics by appealing to a literate written text. This combination of oral narrative didacticism with abstract conceptualisation also gives rise to the oath (120.1-11), unique to Malory, which all Arthur's knights take (Vinaver 1947a: 1330). This oath is an abstract list of the qualities of the heroic code distilled from the narrative matter of the *Morte* as a whole. This hybrid mix of oral and literate reaches its final poignancy in Ector's threnody over the grave of Launcelot (1259.9-21).

What we see is the portrayal of a kind of excellence.... The connexions between courtesy and bearing a shield, between fidelity and bestriding a horse, seem irrelevant and illogical unless we realise that for Malory chivalry was the outward and temporal expression of inner and timeless virtues (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 103).

The conception of these virtues is literate, but still clothed in oral paratactic *copia*.

The heroic code set out in the *Morte* can be examined. It is first of all aristocratic, reinforcing the power of the landed aristocracy to which Malory belonged. All the knightly heroes are nobly born and one episode even teaches that a villain born will ever be lewd, and if given power will only turn to evil (712.23-7). In one instance Malory changes his source (Vinaver 1947a: 1353) to make a lowborn knight aristocratic. The profundity of Malory's investment in these power structures is revealed in the fact that in his tales the noble birth of a knight determines his character and actions. In a rare direct address to the audience the narrator in 375.23-9 states his belief that all men of noble ancestry ('all jantyllumen that beryth olde armys') are fair of speech ('the goodly tearmys that jantyllumen have and use and shall do unto the Day of Dome') and addicted to gentle pursuits ('draw hym to jantyllumen tacchis and to folow the noble customys of jantyllumen'). A repeated narrative device is the revelation of the noble ancestry of a character by his addiction to these pursuits (e.g. 100.2-5). Noble blood enjoins upon a knight noble behaviour, which others then have a right to expect from him (795.32, 810.4-7 and 883.7-9). The symbol of this status is the horse, historical origin of the knightly class and root of the word 'chivalry'. As Lamerok says, 'What is a knyght but whan he is on horsebacke?' (667.22).

The code these knights embody is still rooted in the Germanic warrior ethic, as suggested in section 3.4. The creed of unyielding resistance uttered by Tristram, the ideal knight, when he says, 'And yf so be that I fle other yelde me as recreaunte, bydde myne eme bury me never in Crysten buryellys' (380.34-6) lies behind the formula of fighting 'to the uttermost' (e.g. 381.19-20). The remnants of the feud and *comitatus* systems have been explored above. They are softened into what Malory's world calls courtesy by the incorporation of Christian virtues like gentleness, a process just beginning in *Beowulf*, as noted in chapter 2. However, unlike his sources' complicated philosophy of courtesy, Malory's courtesy remains a complex of practical martial virtues, valued because necessary for good reputation rather than for its own sake. A knight is merciful (107.8-9). He will not steal (910) or fight in an unjust quarrel (407.24-5). Fair

play is essential, with such discourteous actions as a mounted knight attacking a knight on foot (160.30-2) or proven knights jousting with new knights on the opening day of a tournament (731) strongly deprecated. Enemies, even Saracens, can be just as noble and faithful and courageous as the Round Table knights (216). This incorporation of courtesy into the heroic ethic is explicable if the changing social conditions of the people who wrote and listened to such literature are considered. The crowded fourteenth-century world in which these knights ride is different to the wide spaces of Germanic Scandinavia. Knights as competing property hunters have to coexist in some kind of peaceful order, and so the control systems preventing anarchy have adapted, softened. This functioning of the order of chivalry to control violence is obvious in Malory, as when a jealous knight would have struck his rival 'but he forbare for shame' (554.5). It informs the common theme of a knight giving up a legitimate slight to his honour because of his opponent's chivalry (e.g. 451.19-20, 527.3-7, 562.5-6), where the same character can on one occasion be the eager challenger and on another the prudent defender. This theme uses common formulae, as when knights vie to courteously yield to each other, offering up their swords (e.g. 483.21-32). This concentration of oral characteristics signals the didactic importance of this theme.

A further addition in Malory to the more oral heroic code is courtly love. However, unlike his sources, and unlike his fellow romance writers Chrétien or the *Gawain* poet, Malory is interested in the heroic rather than the courtly side of romance (Bradbrook 1958: 32). Marriage is a feudal relationship, with the relationship between lady and knight a parallel to that between lord and vassal (Bradbrook 1958: 14). In the oath quoted above, the practical promise to 'do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir rygtes, and never to enforce them uppon payne of dethe' is a far cry from the quasi-mystical legalities promulgated by Marie de Champagne. There is abundant evidence that Malory alters his sources, cutting out conversations about love (e.g. 570.2, Vinaver 1947a: 1472) and adding sentiments advancing knightly friendship above romantic love (e.g. 763.22-3, Vinaver 1947a: 1508). And here also, rather than being valued for itself, love is seen as a means to fame. In the

Tristram-Isode-Palomides triangle, for example, ‘what matters most to Tristram and Palomides – more even than Isode’s love – is the privilege of devoting all their thoughts to her and of being inspired by her to perform deeds of valour, a privilege which they value more than life itself’ (Vinaver 1947a: 1505). Similarly, in 167.18-28 of the Pelleus-Ettard episode of the ‘Arthur’, Malory changes his source, to suggest that Pelleus only allows himself to be dishonoured in the expectation of reward (i.e. Ettard’s love), rather than in a lover’s disregard for martial honour (Vinaver 1947a: 1354).

This disregard for romantic love further stresses the real function of Malory’s text, which is the exploration of chivalry as a socio-political control system. This focus also results in an unusual presentation of kingship in the *Morte*. On one level Malory reveals oral conservatism, since he has adapted his sources to represent a contemporary fifteenth-century conception of kingship based on belief in the divine right of kings. Throughout the text references to ‘a true kynge enoynted’ (8.38) or a ‘trew and anyoynted kynge’ (1194.28) appear, and the formula ‘a kynge anyoynted with creyme’ (e.g. 227.22, 549.16) seems to be original to Malory. Other practical details reflecting contemporary governance include Arthur’s sole responsibility for a judicial decision which in the sources is referred to a council of barons (e.g. 1174.17-8) (Vinaver 1947a: 1617),³⁹ and the duties of a king (just disposition of property) added to the source’s romantic account of Arthur’s coronation (16.25-30) (Vinaver 1947a: 1285). The kings of the *Morte* are also closer to absolute monarchs than the chieftains of *Beowulf*; whereas the Anglo-Saxon poem gives equal weight to a king’s duties and rights, the *Morte* stresses the loyalty owed to the king by his men. In the ‘Arthur’, a tale concerned with the nature of kingship, Merlin calls to the new knights, ‘all aryse and com to kynge Arthure for to do hym omage; he woll the better be in wylle to maynteyne you’ (98.35-6), whereas in the source this homage is shared, with Arthur only *primus inter pares* (Vinaver 1947a: 1320). As well as ‘oure soverayne lorde’ (e.g. 214.26-7) Arthur is called ‘oure kynde lord’ (e.g. 214.32) but this seems an empty formula. Only one

³⁹ Arthur says, ‘I may nat with my worshyp but my quene muste suffir dethe’ (1174.17-8); his reason for this decision is his renown.

obligation seems to be laid on Arthur by his rank, and it points to the profound though subtle literacy of the work. Arthur as king has to be an honourable knight. This obligation is highlighted by the contrast drawn between Mark of Cornwall, whose treacherous deeds are more shame to him because he is a 'kynge anoynted with creyme' (e.g. 549.14-8), whereas Arthur rules 'as a noble knyght' (545.11-12). Malory's determination to make Arthur a figurehead for the chivalric ethic is seen when, after Arthur most uncourtously surprises Isode just to see her beauty, Tristram says that 'all knyghts may lerne to be a knyght of hym' (745.29). This praise added by Malory is not merited by the scene preceding it (Vinaver 1947a: 1506). Arthur's primacy in courtesy is necessary, because the *Morte* is no longer an encyclopaedic oral epic, but a romance exploring the specific idea of chivalry as a socio-political control system, and so only Arthur's chivalry is really important in his character. Arthur's primacy is also necessary because the *Morte* shows a further development of that national pride hinted at in *Beowulf*, a pride that builds up to the end of the tales, where geography becomes important in this tale of the fate of a nation, rather than of individuals (Bradbrook 1958: 34). This devotion to an abstract grouping rather than to kinship ties is also literate.

Paradoxically, it is as characters springing from the transition of orality to literacy that the *Morte*'s heroes seem so modern. Their heavy shading of oral residue makes them unlike typical romance characters in that they are not allegorical. Romance heroes represent virtues (the Green Knight, for example, represents truth) so they cannot die unless virtue dies too (Hill 1963: 106), so that the 'termini' of romance are not success and failure, victory or death, as they are in epic, but 'perfection and shame' (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 6). This explains romance's invariable happy ending, since virtues cannot die and so the hero cannot die either. The characters of the *Morte* are too oral to be allegorical. They set out an ethical code in the dilemmas they face and the actions they take rather than representing abstracts themselves. However, they are too literate, too separated into individual figures to be epic heroes like Achilles or Beowulf. As noted above, epic deals with the collision of character and circumstance, romance with emotion itself or the nature of the predicament (Finlayson 1992: 130). Thus Malory's peculiar blend of

oral and literate results in increasingly rounded characters caught in the traditional epic collision which can only end in death, yet intellectually conscious enough to appreciate the nature of their predicament. This is the power of the *Morte*'s tragedy.

3.7. Cultivation of praise and vituperation / agonistic tone

Ong mentions the agonistic tone of oral discourse, which tends to polarity in action, characterisation and imagery and to the cultivation of praise and vituperation in dialogue. This characteristic is heightened in romance by the simplification of the romance world (discussed in section 3.4) and by the didactic significance of romance characters as type figures exploring the knightly virtues. Malory's sources show this tendency, the prose *Tristram* for example showing clear-cut good and bad characters, with the good ending up happy and the bad suffering (Vinaver 1947a: 1435).

The themes of burial and death, which as stated above because of their subject tend to remain oral longest, show agonistic tones. The nobility of Lucius and Guinevere is reflected in their sumptuous burials, discussed in section 3.2. Launcelot dies in the odour of sanctity, with 'the swettest savour aboute hym than ever they felte' (1258.17) and enters heaven accompanied by 'mo angelles than ever [they] sawe men in one day' (1258.8-9), with both images of virtue set in a formulaic negative construction. This heavily oral scene also uses the formula, 's/he laye as s/he had smyled' (1258.16) used of Elaine of Astolat in 1096.16. In contrast, when the pagan Sir Corsabryne dies, 'cam a stynke of his body... that there myght nobody abyde the savoure' and he is buried unceremoniously in a wood (666.14-6). Both passages mention an odour, and use negative construction appealing to general experience. This theme links to the widespread medieval belief in the incorruptibility of the bodies of saints.

As discussed above, Malory's characterisation has developed beyond simple types and his interest in the complex emotional and intellectual motives lying behind human interactions

prevents most of his major characters from fitting easily into any categorisation of virtue. However, characters and events in the *Morte* do tend to extremes, with ‘strong and sudden passions often [making] knights outstandingly heroic or wicked, and sometimes both by turns’ (Field 1978: 46). The concentration on martial chivalry also creates characters such as the Red Knight of the Red Lands, who is a good knight because he is noble and an accomplished fighter, but a bad man because he is harsh and over-proud. As in many other aspects, the ‘Tristram’ in its polarisation of character appears the most ‘oral’ of the tales. As mentioned above, Malory goes out of his way to alter his source to make Mark a cowardly, treacherous liar, so that the king provides a heightened contrast with the ideal Tristram and with Arthur. A recurring minor character of this tale, Breunis Sans Pité, is also thoroughly unknightly. However, Malory redeems the character of Dinadan, making him a worthy fighter who in jest only mocks the knightly code, which at first glance seems a blurring of the agonistic cast of the story. Since Dinadan is so closely allied with Tristram it may be that Malory’s agonistic tendencies, coupled with his need to use Tristram as a didactic ideal, make it impossible for him to blur the agonistic colouring of Tristram by association with a dubious companion.

From characterisation we move to imagery. The sparse nature of Malory’s description (Field 1971: 86) makes imagery far less common than in the highly visual poetry of *Beowulf*, but agonistic patterns can be discerned in the *Morte*. One is the interplay of light and dark, which, though less pervasive than in the Anglo-Saxon poem, still follows the archetypal patterns observed in *Beowulf*; light is associated with civilisation, integration and good, and dark with wildness, ostracisation and evil. Simple examples include: the aggregative formula ‘durke preson’ (e.g. 138.18 and 140.12) where knights are incarcerated, the darkness Launcelot lies in for twenty-four days and nights as part of his Grail quest (1017.1-2) and the ‘clereness’ bright as torches (1015.16-7) which accompanies the Grail. A particular development of this imagery is found in the descriptions of the funerals of Launcelot and Guinevere, who are both followed to the grave by one hundred torches (1256.7, 1257.26), suggesting an association of nobility with light, and with all that nobility stands for that accords with Malory’s aristocratic political views.

A remnant of related Anglo-Saxon image patterns is the phrase ‘fledde into the weste’ used to describe Guinevere’s flight to Amesbury after the fall of Arthur (1251.17-8). West, the setting of the sun, has connotations of death and exile, and also symbolises the ending of a heroic deed. Other polarised natural imagery is that of spring, used to link the last two tales, firstly in the famous passage comparing love to May (1119-20), then in the contrast of the maying party ‘bedaysshed wyth erbis, mossis, and floures in the freysshyste maner’ with the ambush of knights ‘harneyst as they shulde fyghte in a batayle of areste’ (1122.1-7) and finally in the opening metaphor of the ‘Morte’ (1161.1-8) which likens the end of the Round Table to the withering of the flowers of spring. This agonistic aesthetic is brought to perhaps its most beautiful focus in 865.23, which tells how the light from the Grail makes all those present seem ‘fayrer’ to each other than ever before. This example also reveals how the function of imagery has changed with literacy. Description in oral epic is often formulaic, functioning as a signal of conventionality and aiding memory, and then also utilising archetypal and traditional associations in the interests of didacticism. With the loosening of formulaic structure that comes with writing only this third function of imagery really remains. Descriptions in the *Morte* are ‘moral and emotive’ rather than physical, with Malory using ‘cumulative effect of description in moral and emotive terms’ to try to control his audience’s response (Field 1971: 86) so that they feel reverence for good and fear for evil (Field 1971: 157).

Colour is mostly used as a heraldic disambiguating device (see section 3.5), though sometimes this hints at distinguishing hero from antagonist, as in 387.18-9 where Tristram wears a white shield, and Palomides a black. This black and white polarity is not always significant, however, for example in the ‘Arthur’ where Merlin, a figure of wisdom, rides ‘a grete blacke horse’ (36.27). The only tale where colour is used with some consistency is the ‘Grail’, and this patterning is mostly derived from Malory’s source. Throughout the tale white signifies virtue and black evil; in the ‘Sir Percival’ episode, for example, the good man’s ship is hung with white samite (914.21-3), and the devil’s with black silk (915.35). The parallel is strengthened by similar sentence structure and diction, with Percival in both cases first approaching the ship and

then ‘finding’ it covered in the coloured material. The description of the devil’s ship also uses a formula, ‘blacker than ony beré’ (915.35) which, together with the colour black, becomes in this tale a signal of evil. This building of a local climate of significance becomes of narrative importance later on, where in 962.26-8 the man Bors meets, though clothed like a religious man, rides ‘a stronge blacke horse’, blacker than a berry – all of these are hints of evil, and are borne out by the subsequent action where the man’s advice leads Bors to the brink of damnation. The importance of this colour imagery in guiding the interpretation of an audience is greater because of Malory’s relatively high degree of residual orality. This orality, a tendency to use familiar phrases, leads to the confusing similarity of descriptions of the horses ridden by the good Merlin and the evil tempter and of descriptions of the tempter here and the good man of the Percival episode, who are ‘clothed in a religious wede’ (962.27) and ‘clothed in a surpluse, in lyknes of a pryste’ (915.23-4) respectively. In the ‘Morte’ white and black become an agonistic couplet, satisfying to the aggregative cast of an oral mind, first used in 1243.5-6 at the end of the ‘Day of Destiny’ episode to describe Guinevere as a nun in ‘whyght clothys and blak’, and then repeated in the first paragraph of the next episode, the ‘Dolorous Death and Departing’ (1249.2) to link the episodes together. This mnemonic repetition will be further discussed in the next section.

Many other examples of such agonistic couplets texture the *Morte*, as shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Agonistic couplet phrases

Phrase	Example
for golde nothir for sylver / golde and sylver	37.2-3, 224.1-2
by watir and by londe / by watir and woode	26.7, 30.18, 33.4
quycke or dede	1162.32
by nyght and day / dayly and nyghtly	25.9, 1161.13, 20
nother for well nothyr wo	25.13, 1204.16
both ryche and poure	16.16
both learned and lewd	792.30
ryght othir wronge	1171.30-1
slewe on the right hand and on the lyfte hand	19.8, 30.30
sente from hevyn as angels other devilles frome helle	76.11-12
many were sorry and many were glad	1178.18-9
to come saf and to goo sauf	18.15
full well arayed both for the pees and also for the warre	22.23-4
go with me who so woll, and abyde who that wyll	127.5-6
som were of hys frendis and som were of hys fooyes	503.7-8
many were sore wounded, and many were hole	527.34-5

Simpler phrases link two polar opposites together, either nouns or adjectives with a positive 'and' or a negative 'or', while the more complex examples frame these oppositions in syntactic parallel. The strength of Malory's attraction to such constructions is seen in, for example, 224.1-2, where he changes 'for non siluer' in his source to 'for golde nothir for sylver'. Lord stresses that formulae are never semantically empty, and the same is true of Malory's couplets. The 'weal and woe' opposition which becomes metonymic for Launcelot and his kin (1169.26, 1171.22, 1204.16) pierces to the heart of Launcelot's dilemma, which is his attempt to be true to two different loyalties under all circumstances, and reminds the audience of the all-important family loyalty which precipitates the final feud between Gawain and Launcelot. These doublets are characteristic of medieval texts intended for vocal delivery (Crosby 1936: 105).

Similarly oral traces include exaggeration, such as the reported hundred thousand slain in one of Arthur's battles (224.8-9), and the formulaic use of numbers, such as Launcelot's complaint, 'for this seven yere I was not so slepy as I am nowe' (253.30-1) which replaces the 'very sleepy' of the source (Vinaver 1947a: 1405). Another texturing detail is the sensitive use of the second person singular pronoun, either a respectful 'you' or an intimate or scornful 'thou'. This often adds to praise or blame, as when the Lady Linet upbraids Gareth using 'thee', knowing that her scorn will spur him on to battle (324). Throughout the final feud, as mentioned in section 3.6, Gawain insults Launcelot with 'thou', while Launcelot, conscious of his guilt, remains ever courteous and calls Gawain 'you'. After his repentance, in his deathbed letter to Launcelot (1231) Gawain still uses 'thee' writing in the moment of death, which is a moment of truth that puts aside all barriers between men.

Agonistic structures are perhaps most clearly evident in the actions and dialogue of the characters themselves, which is in keeping with the dramatic nature of Malory's work. For example, the queen says in 1128.16-7 'bettir ys pees than evermore warre, and the lesse noyse the more ys my worshyp'. The balancing of war/peace, less/more and 'noyse' (gossip)/worship (good reputation) reveals the agonistic cast of her thoughts. This juxtaposition of agonistic

patterns and talk of fame is not accidental. As proved by a phrase used to describe Launcelot, as having ‘the greatest **name** of ony knyght of the worlde’ (my emphasis), fame is the driving force of knightly chivalry, and it derives directly from the oral tendency to praise and blame. This fame, however, no longer serves an oral mnemonic function, as it did in *Beowulf*, but instead promotes the ideal hero as embodiment of social values. A possible problem, then, is the single world inhabited by all the knights; how can every one be ‘the greatest knight of his deeds’? A need to keep heroes separate perhaps partly explains Malory’s untangling of the *entrelacément* structure of his sources, noted by Vinaver (1947b: lii). For example, by keeping Tristram and Launcelot from meeting for most of the ‘Tristram’, but lacing the text of Tristram’s adventures with frequent references to Launcelot, Malory manages to keep his two knights both entitled to the name of ‘greatest knight’, each in their own situation. This need for fame also lies behind a repeated theme, which seems fairly pointless otherwise, of a knight collecting his defeated opponent’s names; Gawain on his first quest, for example, asks four knights in succession to identify themselves (104.23, 25-6, 105.8, 106.36-7). Fame is increased by defeating famous knights, and so the name of the vanquished enemy is sought above other spoil. For this reason, as in *Beowulf*, enemies such as the Saracens in the ‘Arthur and Lucius’ (216) are presented as just as noble and faithful and courageous as the Round Table knights, since fame can only come from overcoming worthy enemies. This is also linked to Malory’s habit, mentioned above, of disambiguating anonymous characters by naming them, and lies behind another narrative tendency, which is to speak praise or blame from the mouth of a character rather than that of the narrator. For example, in 105-6 assessment of Gawain’s good and bad behaviour is put in the mouth of Gaherys, his brother, in effect making the text function within the lifeworld of the audience to affirm Gawain as a good knight. The rare authorial asides (e.g. 375, 682-3), mentioned above, which are in praise of Tristram or Arthur, show this oral tendency lapsing into more literate commentary on the story rather than identification with it. The rarity of these asides, as well as the jolt they produce in the flow of the narrative, testifies to the newness of this distancing.

The 'Tristram' has many examples of heroic boasts purposefully inserted by Malory. In 442.17-23 Tristram boasts, starting with a formula demanding attention, 'Wete you well...', listing his deeds linked by the formulaic 'I am he that... and I am he that...', and ending with a declaration of his royal lineage. In the source this speech is spoken by Sir Segwarides, not Tristram himself, but Malory converts it into a boast. Tristram is a highly oral character, as mentioned above, and as such is a great boaster, uttering similar speeches in 493.34-494.7 and 503.25-504.15, which are both additions by Malory (Vinaver 1947a: 1459, 1463).⁴⁰ The first of these boasts Tristram uses in vituperation of Sir Keyhydins, but in literate simplification follows his threat with a blow rather than a flying duel. Arthur welcomes Tristram to court by reciting the Cornish knight's knightly and courtly accomplishments (571.27-35). Even cowardly Sir Breunis boasts, in 614.8-10 shouting his name to his fallen opponents, which is not in the French source and is contrary to the courtly custom of a knight only revealing his name when requested or forced to do so (Vinaver 1947a: 1482). Dinadan's plan of revenge on King Mark, which is to 'make' a lay defaming him, 'the worste lay that ever harper songe with harpe or with any other instrument' (618.18-9) depends on the importance of fame, and testifies to the centrality of oral literature in its spread (in literary tradition at least). The account of the singing of the lay (626-7) suggests that singers, as mouthpieces of public opinion, still possessed the immunity mentioned in Chapter 1. The verb 'make' used to describe the composition process is open to interpretation as either oral or written.

Malory's decided bent for oral agonistic dialogue perhaps lies behind his uneasy integration of Dinadan. As mentioned above, Malory redeems Dinadan by adding phrases praising his worth as a knight, which contradict Dinadan's many scoffing and cowardly speeches copied direct from the source (e.g. 505.21-5, 507.1-2, 27-8) (which Tristram answers with a formulaic 'Fye for shame!'). As a knight associated with Tristram, Dinadan has to be ideal, yet his highly emotive speeches that point out albeit negatively the virtue of valour, have to be left in also.

⁴⁰ Though not a boast, Tristram's farewell speech (392.23-30), also an addition by Malory, shows rhetorical balance (Vinaver 1947a: 1448) which reflects oral mnemonic balance.

The importance of fame may seem to be contradicted by the black shield/white shield episode from the 'Grail' mentioned in section 3.4 above, in which Launcelot, the ideal and carrier of the heroic ethic, learns to abandon 'bobbaunce and pryde of the worlde' (933.32). This apparent contradiction is resolved if the exact nature of fame in the *Morte* is understood. Pride is a sin, a selfish concentration on individual prowess, and as such not part of Malory's ideal of knighthood (Tucker in Bennett 1965: 95). Value for fame is quite different, rooted in the ethical and didactic nature of the work and working through the powerful opposites of 'perfection and shame' (Schmidt & Jacobs 1980a: 6) to teach the value of the chivalric code; in other words, to persuade, not describe. This 'morally emphatic' style, the agonistic rhetorical nature of Malory's work, foreshadows the great age of Tudor literature that followed though it is not part of the mainstream ecclesiastical rhetorical tradition (Ong 1971: 65).

3.8. Copiousness

The final oral characteristic we can trace in the *Morte* is copiousness, a delight in repetition. As discussed above, Malory's text is intended to be heard, and so repetition assumes hermeneutic importance, while retaining lingering mnemonic value. The *Morte* is similar to *Beowulf* in that it shows repetition of words, phrases and plot sections, which varies from exact repetition of formulae to general repetition of concept clusters. The simplicity of Malory's language aids the aural effect of oral repetition in setting up a norm, a background texture which the audience accepts however redundant. The audience instinctively compensates for any slight mistake that varies from this standard, but any really new or surprising thought or phrase becomes highly effective (Russo 1994: 376-7, 384).

On the level of words and phrases, Field identifies three types of repetition in Malory. 'Doublets', paired synonyms that do not add meaning, are the first type. These doublets are characteristic of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers (1971: 76) and are examples of aggregative residual oral thought though Latin-derived (Lewis in Bennett 1965: 23). Examples

include ‘descended down’ (1124.23, 1151.6-7) and ‘alyght and voyded hys horse’ (1196.27). Malory uses this device sparingly (Field 1971: 78). Second is repetition of near synonyms, often in fight scenes, where ‘the normal syntactical flow is broken by... sequences of repetitive present participle forms of similar but not identical length, to describe an interruption of the normal sequence of action by a series of repetitive and similar but not identical actions by the characters’ (Field 1971: 78). An example can be taken from the fight between Gareth and the Knight of the Red Lands (323.6-14):

6 And than thus they fought tyll hit was paste none, and
 never wolde stynte tyll at the laste they lacked wynde bothe,
 and than they stode waggyng, stagerynge, pantynge,
 blowyng, and bledyng, that all that behelde them for the
 10 moste party wepte for pyté. So what they had rested them
 a whyle they yode to batayle agayne, trasynge, traversynge,
 foynynge, and rasyng as two borys. And at som tyme they
 toke their bere as hit had bene two rammys and horled
 togydys, that somtyme they felle grovelyng to the erthe...

The words and phrases underlined are formulaic (see section 3.2); the time is archetypal (‘paste none’) and parallel syntax structures are used (‘at som time’). The style is paratactic. The two strings of participles (in ll.8-9 and 11-12) function vividly to suggest the exhaustion yet ferocity of the opponents. This type of highly visual, highly formulaic repetition is heavily oral, as its association with one of the most enduring themes, Combat, shows.

A third type of repetition is the repetition of words, word-groups and formulaic phrases half-a-dozen times in a short passage and then not again for pages (Field 1971: 78-9). For example, in pages 1202-4, the word ‘depart’ is used fourteen times in telling of Launcelot’s departure from England; ten times meaning ‘leave’ (1202.11, 23, 28, 30, 1203.1, 2 (twice), 3, 1204.12, 15), once meaning ‘be parted from’ (1203.8) and three times meaning ‘divide’ (1203.22, 23, 1204.33). This concentrated use of a single word at a highly tragic moment in the story, heightened by Launcelot’s repetition of ‘fleymed’ (‘exiled’) in his speech (1203.1-8) to call up all the anguish of the breaking of *comitatus* bonds, gives the word special overtones. This type of repetition creates expectations in the audience, who gather from the pattern thus created all the various meanings of previous uses (Field 1971: 81). Malory repeats this technique using

'depart' at other tragic moments (Field 1971: 82). Similarly, the Pelleas and Ettard episode of the 'Arthur' revolves around the word 'faith', with 'truth', 'trouthe', 'plight truth to' and 'faithful' repeated (167-9), first suggesting Pelleas' courtly faithfulness to his lady, and then Gawain's faithless promise to help Pelleus (highlighted by use of the formula 'by the faith of my body' 169.33, ironic since he sleeps with Ettard). The culmination of this hub comes in 170.9 where Pelleas's cry, 'Alas, that ever a knyght shulde be found so false' points to the didactic purpose of the episode, teaching the code of knightly honour. The hingeing of the episode on the virtue of faith also explains why in 172.4 Pelleas calls Ettard a 'traytours', though strictly speaking she has betrayed no-one.

Sometimes this repetition seems unconscious, the effect of lingering oral noetics on Malory's creative process. For example, in 586.1-2, 590.11-2 and 593.29 a distance is described using the phrase 'three-myle English'; the three episodes are independent, only similar in that King Mark's name appears within two lines of each use of the phrase. It seems that Malory having used the phrase first for whatever reason, a tendency to aggregative thought brings it most naturally to his pen in the two following episodes when he has to describe a journey. This example, like the Launcelot and the Pelleus-Ettard examples, shows how patterns of repetition knit sections of text together round an aural hub, and also how the repeated words or phrases tend to either bring out the significance of the action occurring (the tragedy of Launcelot's departure or the importance of faith in the first two examples) or be linked to a theme (the journeys of the second example). Both these functions, didactic and thematic, are oral.

Repetition in Malory is also important for linking the individual tales to the Arthurian tradition as a whole. The 'Launcelot' begins with references to Launcelot saving Guinevere from the fire (253.19), which must refer to the Mellyagaunt episode or the queen's final treason trial, both of which occur in the last two tales, suggesting that the author is, and expects his audience to be,

familiar with the outline of the entire story.⁴¹ Malory strengthens this link to tradition by citing its symbol, ‘the Frey[n]sh booke’ (253.14). Since the Launcelot of the *Morte* is largely Malory’s invention (Vinaver 1947: 1364) this invocation of tradition has become emptier since the *Beowulf* poet employed it, reassuring the audience because of its authority rather than activating detailed traditional knowledge. This vague tradition has authority, however; 1130.3 refers to how Launcelot ‘ded many dedys and grete adventures’ which, though they are not described and do not exist as part of shared traditional knowledge, are yet enough to enhance Launcelot’s reputation. This vagueness is characteristic of Malory’s invention, for when he refers to the deeds and histories of more developed traditional characters, such as Tristram (e.g. 175.9-14) he mentions specific acts.

Though less dependent on tradition, Malory’s tale is still thoroughly vocal, and by far the most prominent function of repetition in the *Morte* is hermeneutic, enabling a listening audience to follow. For example, in 1235.10-3 Arthur warns his army, saying ‘loke ye com on fyersely and sle that traytoure, sir Mordred, for [I] in no wyse truste hym’. In the next line Mordred warns his host in almost identical phrases, ‘loke that ye com on fyersely and so sle all that ever before you stondyth, for in no wyse I woll nat truste for thys trefte’.

If a listening audience mishears the first speech, they certainly will catch the second, and so will understand the tragic mistake that leads to the climactic battle ten lines later. Malory has a habit of altering his sources to anticipate the solution of mysteries, for example in 207.1-4 telling of the ambush which in the end ensures Gawain and the other messengers’ safety, which his source does not (Vinaver 1947a: 1374), thus assuring the audience of the safety of this major character. This strongly suggests a text intended to be heard. Rather than Anglo-Saxon variation Malory uses direct repetition, sometimes by the narrative voice (e.g. 361.6-11 and 363.11-16), by a character retelling a story (e.g. 688.8-10, 699.15-27), by a letter being read or dictated (e.g. 701.15-23 and

⁴¹ This knowledge of the plot is prerequisite for the success of other narrative techniques, such as Gawain and Gareth’s prophecy, after the flight of Launcelot from the queen’s chamber, that ‘now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshup of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled’ (1162.31-3), intended to enhance the tragic mood as the climax of the story approaches.

713.10-21), by a character recounting previous action (e.g. 14.10-4) or by prophecy (e.g. 568.10-20). Direct repetition is also found in the introductory paragraphs beginning each tale, and of course in the colophons beginning and ending the various tales.

As well as these widespread repetitions of actions across the tales as a whole, repetition of narrative details occurs over restricted sections, similarly to the repetition of words explored above. With tradition losing its strength, and traditional themes fading, this repetition serves to set up what could be called local themes, a set of narrative details repeated two or three times in succession, so that a listening audience knows what to expect. This makes the narrative easier to follow, and makes any manipulations of these themes the author may use more effective. For example, in the 'Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt' section of the 'Arthur', Ywain's adventures parallel Marhalt's: a tournament in which the hero is successful, followed by a 'quest'. Also, Marhalt travels south and finds an enemy of Arthur, duke of the South Marches, while Uwain travels west and fights the tournament in the 'marche of Walys' (Vinaver 1947a: 1358). Both sections begin with the formula 'now turn we unto' (172.23, 176.20) and the 'hear mass and break fast' formula is used before both of their fights (174.10-1, 177.31-2). Both accounts share the narrative detail of receiving the sword and allegiance of conquered enemy (174.301, 178.17-8) and that of the hero staying 'nyghe halfe a yere' with the person he has aided because of wounds sustained in the battle (176.10-1, 178.25-6). This kind of repetition is very prevalent in the final battle sections of the 'Morte': 1215.7-10 and 1218.30-3 repeat the 1214.20-2 description of Gawain armed before the city walls; 1219.20-2 describes Launcelot armed in exactly the same words; the second duel between Launcelot and Gawain, in 1220-1221, is a replica of the first in 1216-8; 1232.28-30 repeats the practical measures taken after a battle described in 1230-3-4. This repetition strengthens the (oral) agonistic comparison between Launcelot and Gawain that gives these scenes so much of their tragic power, as well as concentrating the narrative through simplification, thus enabling the audience to focus on their experience of the tragedy.

(‘brochys and bees’, ‘good rynges and...ryche juell’) and in the objects described (rings, rich jewels), is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon imagery. The final doublet, ‘their harneys and their ryches’, links this traditional imagery to Malory’s own, for it links treasure to the horse, the symbol of knightliness. The enormity of this outrage, then, arises from the identity of the plundered slain as knights, since knighthood is Malory’s ideal and the didactic focus of the work. It is significant that in this characteristically emotive description the author’s horror at the overthrowing of his ideal is expressed in unconsciously oral patterns.⁴²

Particularly telling of Malory’s orality too are examples of a pattern described by Russo in Homer (1994: 379), where an action is described before its causal agent. For example, Tristram describes himself as ‘borne and gotyn upon a quene’ (381.17), and the wicked damsel in the ‘Arthur’ ‘[falls] downe deede and never [speaks] worde after, and [burns] to colys’ (157.35-7). On the level of action, Torre’s foster-father, the cowherd, arrives in court (99.12) because of the king’s proclamation which is only told later (99.21-26). Similarly, the people of Dover first tell Launcelot of the deaths of Arthur and Mordred (1250.11-2) and then of the battle in which they died (1250.13-5).⁴³ Malory also tends to use repetitive patterns of numbers, as when at the end of the ‘Morte’ Launcelot weeps three days (1251.6-8), the queen swoons three times (1251.32), and Launcelot has a vision three times in one night (1255.21). Such repetition has no significance beyond a medieval feeling for numerology, which has its roots in oral thinking. In this case, three, the number of mystic completeness, is appropriate for the conclusion of the tale.

At other times Malory’s urge towards *copia* leads to injudicious repetition. Sometimes the repetition seems purely mechanical, such as ‘and therewithal departed sir Sadoke frome her, and ayther departed frome other’ (635.15-6), or ‘he shall be mucche bettir than ever was his fadir, sir Launcelot, that ys hys owne fadir’ (798.27-8). This is reminiscent of an oral poet composing as

⁴² Similarly, the enormity of Mordred’s treachery is conveyed in the repetitious phrases, ‘beate hys owne fadir fro hys owne londys (1229.21) and ‘lette hys owne fadir to londe uppon the londe that he was kynges over’ (1229.27-8). Note also the pronominal confusion.

⁴³ Interestingly, this oral patterning is absent in *Beowulf*.

he goes, using repetition to fill a pause while he thinks where to take the narrative next. That neither Malory nor his copyists thought these repetitions worth expunging is evidence of their profoundly oral expectations of literature. This oral cast to Malory's composition is also seen in his occasional lack of inventiveness. For example in 586.31-4 a group of knights need somewhere to stay overnight, because Malory has shifted the order of the episodes in his source (Vinaver 1947a: 1476). So, he just repeats in condensed form a passage from the previous page, 585.8-14; in both cases the knights stay at the home of a knight who succours all errant knights, and have 'grete/good chere'. Similarly in 459.9 a wicked knight needs a name (since Malory does not tolerate anonymous characters), so he becomes 'Brewnor le Noyre', since the villain of the previous tale is 'Nabon le Noyre' (441.8). An example of injudicious repetition that Malory simply copies from his source is found in the 'Arthur', where in order to reinforce a step in the narrative for a listening audience, Accolon talks about Morgan's plot to kill Arthur (146.1-10), though in the plot he is supposed to be ignorant of it. Malory adds several examples of such repetition for reinforcement himself, such as Accolon's prophecy also in this episode (146.10-2) of Morgan's attempt on the life of her husband King Urience (Vinaver 1947a: 1343), or Arthur's sudden unmotivated suggestion in the Mellyagaunce episode that Launcelot may have been treacherously trapped (1135.23-4). And sometimes the urge to repeat leads Malory to be disastrously inept (Field 1971: 110), as when Lamerok sings a lament for his love, the Queen of Orkeney, 'modir unto sir Gawayne and to sir Gaherys, and modir to many other' (579.23), which suggests a stout matron rather than a beautiful mistress!

Side-by-side with these oral characteristics Malory shows stylistic features proving how far he is from primary orality. To several episodes he adds concluding sections tying up loose ends, which Ong points out as impossible for an oral mind (1982: 151). For example, at the end of the 'Launcelot' (286.13-287.27) all its minor characters reappear at the Pentecost feast and acclaim Launcelot as 'the grettyste name of any knyght of the worlde' (25-6). Similarly, at the end of the 'Torre and Pellinor' section of the 'Arthur' Malory adds his unique summary of knightliness (119.32-120.12), a listing of abstracts like 'treason' and 'rights' impossible for oral thinking.

Ong cites lists as inherently literate, and they are found throughout Malory's work. One retained from the alliterative *Morte* is distinctly oral, a catalogue of the embarkation of an army which fits Havelock's theory of knowledge transmission (196.1-9). Other lists quote names, using their power to invoke the rest of tradition, or reinforcing kinship structures (e.g. 162.1-5, 1147.17-1150.33). Some of the tales referred to in these lists are told in the *Morte* and others not, some are found in known sources and others not, which either suggests a depth of oral tradition Malory could draw on, or else that, as suggested above, his audience would accept any 'facts' clothed in the correct style. Some names Malory uses over and over, such as Kay the Seneschal or Mador de la Porte, and some he seems to invent for the moment, with odd results such as 'sir Gromoresom Erioure' (1164.13-4).

Examination of the first of Malory's lists, in 16.1-4, shows how he creates them. The list names the knights set as guardians about the young Arthur, and includes 'syr Bawdewyn of Bretayn, syre Kaynes, syre Ulfyus, syre Barsias'. This list is not in Malory's source for this book, the *Suite de Merlin* (Vinaver 1947a: 1285). However, Sir Bawdewyn appears in 'Arthur and Lucius' (190.7), which Vinaver holds was written directly before 'King Arthur'; Sir Kay is Arthur's foster brother, and has been involved in the action leading up to Arthur's ascension of the throne; and Sir Ulfyas and Sir Barsias appear (as Ulfyus/Ulfuns and Brastias), first in the episode relating the begetting of Arthur (9.9-10) and then as the messengers sent to France to raise aid for the war (20.31). So Malory draws on the material adjacent to the list in his sources (Vinaver 1947a: 1285), to create a list of names satisfactory to his literate, orderly and commonsensical mind. These lists thus also function to create an internal context, a texture of names the audience will become familiar with. The one type of episode where Malory's lists tend to be recounted as strings of actions, which is the oral form most famously epitomised by the *Iliad's* catalogue of ships, is battle scenes, as usual. The first example, in the 'Arthur' (17.5-15), is translated from the source; it follows the pattern 'ther com to the feste king X of Y with Z hundred knights with hym'. In the 'Launcelot and Guinevere' a similar pattern is found listing the knights arriving for the Great Tournament (1106.14-1107.15), where the formula is 'King X

of Y brought with hym Z hundred knyghts'. Again, combat themes rise most easily to Malory's pen heavy with oral residue. In contrast, when the self-reflexive creation Sir Launcelot makes a list, he counts his points off 'one... another... third... fourthe' (1199.11-27).

Sir Bawdewyn of Bretayn is important in a further example of Malory's creation of an internal context. In 16.33, Arthur after his coronation names knights to the offices of government, specifically Sir Bawdewyn to that of constable. Later, in 'Arthur and Lucius', this same knight is made one of the two protectors of England to rule in the king's absence on the Roman campaign. This is an identical office, held by an identical man. It appears that the audience Malory envisaged were accustomed to and would not reject such repetition. To an audience operating in the paradigm of vocality, in fact, such patterns of repetition are vital. This repetition also supports Vinaver's suggestion that 'Arthur and Lucius' was written first of the tales, so that when Malory came to write 'King Arthur' a knight so trusted by the king would have been an obvious member of the group of his closest guardians and supporters. This linking of human motivations is characteristic of Malory, as will be further discussed.

A form of repetition much used in Malory's sources is *entrelacément* (Vinaver 1947b: li-ii), a method of composition in which 'each episode appear[s] to be a digression from the previous one and at the same time a sequel to some earlier unfinished story' (Vinaver 1947b: lii), the text textured like a woven tapestry ending with threads still loose. No part can be removed without damaging the whole (Vinaver 1947b: l). Malory abandoned most of this, reducing the bulk of the stories and altering their arrangement by means of mechanical reduction (just leaving out material); 'telescoping' (making two different scenes or two different characters one); and his historically important change, substituting modern narrative for *entrelacément*. He unravels and straightens out the narrative threads to form each into 'a consistent and self-contained set of adventures' (Vinaver 1947: lii-iv). This unravelling is obviously only possible for a literate author. To illustrate this process, a section of the 'Tristram', 496.10-504.16, can be examined.

Malory has taken two story segments from two points in the source, those numbered I-III and those IV-VII, and rearranged them (Vinaver 1947a: 1461), as shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Structure of an episode from the ‘Tristram’ (496.10-504.16)

Malory	French source	Action of episode
<i>a</i> 496.10-497.2	IV 161 ^v column1-2	Tristram and the herdsmen; Dagonet episode
<i>b</i> 497.3-9	I 121 ^f col.1-121 ^v col.1	Palomides hears of Tristram’s madness
<i>c</i> 497.10-498.8	II 125 ^f col.1-129 col.1	Palomides confronts Mark; they are reconciled
<i>d</i> 498.9-32	V 161 ^v col.2-163 ^f col.1	Dagonet complains to Mark; Tristram wrongly identified
<i>e</i> 498.33-499.24	III 130 ^v col.1-133 ^f col.1	Andred mourns Tristram’s supposed death; Isode attempts suicide
<i>f</i> 499.25-31	VI 162 ^f col.1 ll.18-36	Tristram fostered by hermit
<i>g</i> 499.32-504.16	VII 163 ^f col.1-166 ^v col.1	Tristram fights the giant Tauleas, is taken home, and recognised by Isode

At the end of section *a* (496.10-497.2), which in the source goes straight into section *d*, Malory adds a formulaic summarising sentence: ‘thus sir Trystrams endured there an half-yere naked, and wolde never com in towne’ (497.1-2). The formula ‘X yere’ is repeated from ‘a quarter of a yere’ (496.17) at the beginning of section *a*. The phrase ‘in towne’ serves to introduce sections *b* and *c*, which by relating Palomides’ reception of the news of Tristram’s madness and the Saracen’s confrontation with King Mark carry the narrative into the town. Sections *b* and *c* follow each other in the source. The transition between sections *c* and *d*, which are far separated in the source, is marked by a formula of transition: ‘Now turn we unto...’ (498.9). Section *d*, which tells of Tristram’s mistaken identification as sir Matto le Breune (498.28), flows logically into section *e*, the tale of Andred’s attempt to capitalise on his cousin’s disappearance, though these episodes are separated in the source. This section ends with the image of Isode lying helpless in the castle, ‘syke, nyghe at the poynte of dethe’ (499.24) – which is then immediately contrasted with the scene of Tristram staying in a hermitage in section *f*, moved here by Malory. This parallel seems deliberately created, since the short *f* section has no other narrative function. Section *f* is also introduced by a transition formula, ‘So thys meanewhyle...’ (499.25), and flows naturally into section *g*, Tristram’s fight with Tauleas, which will lead to Tristram’s return to the castle and the recognition scene with Isode. Overall, then, Malory moves from Tristram in the forest to the castle and back again, enabling a listening audience to follow the parallel plot

lines which must in the end converge, and providing them with signposting in the form of transition formulae and repetition. The placing of the final three sections seems motivated by a sensitivity for a theme-like ‘tension of essences’, in this case revolving around the love between Tristram and Isode.

3.9. Conclusion

Malory’s work reflects the perceptions of his age. The third quarter of the fifteenth century saw rising prosperity and living standards, and a cultural renaissance in art, architecture, literacy, education and literary activity. Englishmen were also becoming more nationalistic, proud of their history, law and institutions. This pride, of which Arthur is the embodiment and focus, is what makes tragedy possible, as it did in the Greek city-states in the fifth century BC. ‘The Christian culture of the early Middle Ages had no idea of social progress, no hope of a better life in this world, and, as a consequence, no tragedy.’⁴⁴ The rediscovery of Greek literature and philosophy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries made Western tragedy possible again, accompanied as it was by renewed faith in humanity’s power of self-determination (Kennedy in Tymieniecka 1984: 364). Tragedy depends on hope, for each protagonist, looking back, can see how he could have acted differently to prevent the disaster, but also on inevitability, for each protagonist shows that, given his character and situation, he could not have acted differently (Kennedy in Tymieniecka 1984: 375). All epic is tragic, but the tragedy of orality is annihilation of the kind faced by the Geats at the end of *Beowulf* or the Trojans in the *Iliad*; it is the destruction of a culture, the loss of knowledge. The tragedy of the *Morte Darthur* is at once more abstract and more individual, arising from the conflict between rival loyalties which the individual heroes, though they grasp the worth of both, cannot find a way to reconcile. The tragedy is so bitter because it arises not through fate or momentary weakness, but ‘from the depths of [the protagonists’] noblest passions, from the uncompromising sincerity of their

⁴⁴ The enlightenment faith in humanity’s power to reach perfection, leading into the Victorian loss of faith, following similar reasoning explains the flowering of tragedy in the twentieth century.

devotion to a chosen aim' (Vinaver 1947a: 1610). This concept of tragedy requires self-conscious, literate characters. Beowulf's moment of self-examination as he lies dying is an oral-literate hybrid, since his literate act of looking into himself is for the purpose of assuring his oral legacy, fame after death. This understanding of death as a moment of truth develops into a constant in Malory, where 'death is the one fact which is emotionally charged' (Bradbrook 1958: 30). Elaine's defence of her love (1093.3-1094.3), Gawain's final letter to Launcelot (1231-2), Arthur's desolate 'for in me ys no truste for to truste in' (1240.32), Launcelot's sigh over the corpse of Guinevere (1256.3-4) and Ector's threnody (1259.9-21) all express a desire to claim for the individual experience some significance. In oral epic the significance is the action itself, recreated and experienced in the performance of the poem by poet and audience, but in an increasingly literate world meaning has to be explicitly attached to action. This is symbolised in Malory's work by the theme of the posthumous letter, which enshrines the individual interpretation of motives and events in permanent form.

Malory stands at the end of romance's path in English literature. The factor that finally caused this path to dwindle to nothing was the passing of orality, because people forgot how to experience the conventions of the oral world. 'Between Malory, in whom the conventions are dying, and Spenser, comes the renaissance which, together with time, obliterates the art' (Hill 1963: 107). Renaissance humanism's privileging of English language and literature 'at almost the same time that the printing press allowed for the proliferation of identical – hence fixed – texts' swept away most lingering oral residue (Machan in Doane & Pasternack 1991: 243). Writing freed epic from the noetic imperatives of mnemonics to become romance, but this freedom brought with it the risk of total disengagement. The 'free intensity' of experience disengaged and disencumbered, to use Henry James' phrase, is the power of romance, provided 'the sacrifice of community, of the 'related' sides of situations, has not been too rash' (Beer 1970: 16). From his unique position on the path from orality to literacy Malory manages to remain relevant to his community while achieving the peaks of emotional intensity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

This examination of *Beowulf* and the *Morte Darthur* is a narrowly focused but, I believe, suggestive survey of the noetic shift in Western culture from the end of primary orality to the beginnings of typographic literacy. The seven characteristics outlined by Ong, namely stereotypical devices, ceremonial appropriation of history, standardisation of themes, epithetic identification, heavy ceremonial characters, agonistic toning and copiousness, show a continuum of development from *Beowulf* to the *Morte*, and reveal the early beginnings of later more literate forms, such as the essay and the novel.

We have seen that *Beowulf* can usefully be approached in noetic terms from the point of view of vocality, as a text written, yet meant to be heard, and still largely rooted in the extra-linguistic context of poet and audience. In the vocal context *langue* and *parole* are still applicable concepts in the sense that the poem, or many of its elements, exists as a *langue*, always half-immersed in the unconscious of the people; the poem exists as text only as it comes into consciousness as an individual instance of *parole*. The seeming ambiguity of the Christian-pagan position of the poem is resolved if its vocality is kept in mind, since this paradigm requires that the mode of production, the *parole*, keep to the traditional mode of reception, the *langue*, otherwise it will not be accepted. However, *Beowulf* is a unique record documenting a moment of social and linguistic evolution, as the *langue* adapts to the changes brought to society, literature and language by the advent of writing and of a foreign Christian culture.

The paradigm shift we need to make when reading *Beowulf*, from the noetics of late typography back to those of vocality, is still critical for a full appreciation of the lushly rambling narrative of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. This text was written before the use of print became widespread, in a period where many of the preconceptions and expectations surrounding narrative were still oral. Thus, though the text is ascribed to an author, Sir Thomas Malory, he and his audience and

his scribes and printers still retained much of the oral understanding of authorship, which meant collecting, embellishing, abridging or otherwise adapting existing matter to be handed on. A fundamental difference between Malory and primary oral discourse is that, instead of poetic tradition delimiting the possible extent of everyday discourse (Havelock 1963: 135), a loosening of the ties between poetic creation and extra-linguistic tradition means that everyday speech now to a greater and greater extent determines and gives birth to the idiom of poetic discourse. The *Morte* shows a mix of oral and literate traits. Though the narrative is prose, and thus, of necessity, written text, it sounds like an address to an audience. With the inevitable autonomy which textuality entails, the narrative yet retains a dependence on an extra-linguistic tradition, the peripheral yet vigorous tradition of fifteenth-century lay prose with links to the wider vernacular French tradition. Just how Malory uses both the restrictions of vocality and the freedom of prose are prints on the noetic path from orality to literacy.

As far as stereotypical or formulaic devices go, *Beowulf* has been seen to show a pattern fully consonant with vocality. While some word patterns suggest a literate poet able to revise his work, and while both vocabulary and formulae show the influence of Christianity, overall tone, vocabulary, formula and theme seem firmly set in the traditional oral extra-linguistic tradition. These traditional features are most often the result of subconscious patterns, like the ritual laments that shape the tones of the Funeral Pyre Theme, or the 'tension of essences' behind the Royal Woman mini-theme. Unlike other Anglo-Saxon poets, such as the writer of the *Dream of the Rood*, the *Beowulf* poet seems still to find the oral tradition sufficient and meaningful for his artistic purpose and his audience.

Malory's use of formulaic devices, in contrast, reflects his hybrid noetics. With strong rhythms and simple, colloquial diction (both of which tend to reflect his sources to a large extent), the text shows strong residual conservatism; the author has to depend on something but no longer has a complete tradition to shape his narrative, and so draws on existing sources to meet his needs. The sections he actually writes himself show a relatively high concentration of formulaic

devices, suggesting that his primary method of composition is still largely oral, yet in passages not dealing with traditional themes (for which no formulae exist) Malory is quite capable of original, powerful prose of great psychological penetration. What he principally seems to utilise of the oral poetic culture is the relationship of identification between audience and author, a relationship fostered by the hypnotic rhythms of his text, in the oral manner described by Havelock. Within this secure relationship other oral characteristics are, in the process of the internalisation of writing, transmuting into literate characteristics. Internal formulae and themes are created, which no longer refer to an extra-linguistic tradition but function within the work as a whole or within individual tales. The use of narrative context to create new meanings for words, one of the functions of oral poetic discourse, accelerates in the increasingly self-referential and autonomous world of the text. The heavily formulaic colophons, residual markers of the boundaries of poetic utterance and signals of vocalicity, become signals of this textuality. Fight formulae are signals of conventionality yet carry full semantic content, which makes greatly concentrated narration possible; this favours both reading, which allows recapping of details, and also vocal performance to an audience still linked to a lingering, partly oral tradition. Textuality is winning out over tradition, however, for Malory sometimes jumbles the details of themes, showing that the deeper noetic structures, what Lord calls the 'tension of essences' of the themes, are being lost. Archetypal themes are also disappearing, with only Burial vestigially present and Combat now representing more overtly socio-economic social structures rather than ritual kingship. The formulaic contents of the seven tales could be compared, and the noetic traces of Malory's sources disentangled from the noetic forces governing his own process of composition.

Beowulf shows a mythical, archetypal sense of time, which is oral, and a distinct sense that the poem is set in the past, which is literate. Overall the poem still shows conservative oral noetics, because, though it absorbs Christian elements and reshapes traditional matter to some extent, it does not abandon the traditional heroic outlook. This reveals the fundamental orality of the poem's vocal noetics.

In contrast, emerging textuality determines the presentation of history in the *Morte*. As a medieval text it presents history orally, that is, adapts facts and personalities to remain relevant to contemporary issues and sensibilities, and clings to past authorities like ‘the French books’ even for original sections. Yet the very formulae of residual orality are now signals of conventionality allowing artistic freedom, because they signal the autonomy of the tales as artistic discourse rather than linking them to an all-enveloping extra-linguistic context. The licence to differ from tradition is characteristic of romance, not epic. This freedom results in literate distance, so that Malory is distinctly aware that his tale is set in a separate past, and, combined with the magisterial function of traditional oral poetical discourse, his awareness causes this distance to take the form of nostalgia for a golden age. These powerful forces will with the development of chirographic noetics result in the fantasy genre. In the *Morte* the main restraint on this freedom is linguistic, because often the only available vocabulary for temporal and spatial concepts is traditional and formulaic, thus keeping the link between the lifeworld of the audience and the adjacent poetic world of the tales.

The themes addressed in *Beowulf* are still largely determined by oral noetics. Overall the space of the poem overlaps with the space of tradition, which as extra-linguistic context is still almost wholly one with the space of everyday life. Thus feud and *comitatus*, monsters and ‘verbomotor’ mindset are common to poem, tradition and tenth-century English society. However, every now and then, the text, rather than just demonstrating the identity between speech and action, explains this identity, signalling the increasing ‘textuality’ of the poem, the growth of literate noetics, and the gradual separation of story world and lifeworld. Ritual laments are mentioned but no longer re-enacted in the narrative, suggesting that they only remain relevant to the audience on a subconscious, archetypal level. This literate shift is only just beginning, however, for traditional themes of *comitatus* heroism still provide the major channel for the poem’s exploration of themes of transcendence.

Similarly, the themes addressed in the *Morte* are close to the lifeworld of its audience. Like the *Beowulf* poet, Malory is entirely serious in his narration and requires total investment from his audience, which suggests oral involvement rather than literate distancing. The themes of the *Morte* are still restricted largely to those embodying societal control systems, faithfully reflecting contemporary fifteenth-century forms of these systems. The feud and *comitatus* systems have moved towards abstract codes, for example, revealing society's move away from primary orality. The treatment of the central theme of Combat is ceremonial and un-allegorical, thus still profoundly oral (Ong 2002: 493), and the tendency, already seen in *Beowulf*, for residually oral noetic needs to determine societal and poetical value is visible here in the exaggerated place given to fame in the tales. To maintain the vital author-audience relationship Malory replaces the unfamiliar courtly love system of his sources with the familiar one of *comitatus* loyalty, turns the sources' allegorical figures to narrative characters and uses traditional formulaic devices to give the tale a veneer of traditionality. Like an oral poet he does not give detailed descriptions, but rather draws on his audience's own imaginations. Implicit throughout is an assumption of the trustworthiness of tradition and of the tale, which the audience has to share. With the literate freedom discussed above this leads to the tales' functioning by internal laws which, though still partly rooted in tradition and current practice, make the audience particularly dependent on the author, and the author-audience relationship consequently even more important.

In *Beowulf*, traditional structures determine the use of names, epithets and kennings. Traditional modes of production and reception determine patterns of use, both in bringing out the nuances of the immediate narrative context, or aiding the interpretation of wider narrative structures. The kennings of *Beowulf* almost always reinforce social structures, in traditional oral style and, as would be expected, have absorbed the Christian influence, rather than been altered by it. The heaviness of the poem's oral residue is borne out by the kennings' functioning, which is to encourage audience identification with the characters of the poem, particularly the hero.

In contrast, Malory's use of epithets shows a balance of literate freedom and oral dependence on tradition. His naming assumes familiarity with the Arthurian tradition, and individual names are still powerfully linked to whole episodes of traditional narrative. He avoids anonymity as he avoids allegory, yet also shows clumsy attempts at pronoun use, which is a feature of literacy. Sometimes names seem used orally, identified with the person they designate, and other times more literately, as labels. Many names seem to be acceptable purely because they sound conventional, yet with the loosening of ties between the poetic and life-worlds, discussed above, this conventionality becomes even more powerful, making the names doorways to a realm of wider poetic possibility than the rigidly conservative world of purely oral epic.

The characters in *Beowulf* clearly show the oral characteristics of heaviness and flatness, but also signs of more literary traits, like glimmers of self-consciousness, which are the beginnings of roundedness. Here too the principal factor shaping characterisation is the needs of traditional modes of reception. Gnostic phrases are inserted after actions or speeches to point the lesson to be learnt, and the traditional devices of parallelism and contrast are used frequently. Beowulf has vestigial awareness of his actions and motives, yet is portrayed as deeply verbomotor, so he is acceptable as the type hero of the *langue* and the audience can place him in the context of the entire heroic tradition. The assimilation of Christianity occurs in similar pattern, resulting in the hybrid character of Hroðgar.⁴⁵ The lingering of oral characters is explained by noetics; only famous men get into epics, and only epics become part of cultural consciousness, so only in the fame of heroes can the new religion live.

This oral mnemonic remnant fuses in Malory with increasing objective distance, creating a widening in the function of poetic discourse. No longer just exhibiting and teaching social codes, romance tales also explore specific abstract concepts. Thus, though the characters of the *Morte* are heavy, flat and largely emotionally conscious, in other words, still largely oral, yet

⁴⁵ Other poems, like *The Dream of the Rood* or *Judith*, take this process one step further, addressing overtly Christian themes using traditional characters; the Christ of the *Dream* is a Germanic warrior hero, and Holofernes in *Judith* a chieftain among his *comitatus*.

they differ from epic characters in that their individual fates now serve to examine abstractions. For example, the tales as a whole explore chivalry as a socio-political control system; Launcelot is both an oral, idealised embodiment of chivalry, and a literate mechanism for an examination of the feud system. His consciousness of the opposition of duty and desire contrasts with Beowulf's simple courage. Malory keeps his characters real rather than allegorical, but also seems unsatisfied with the purely concrete didacticism of orality, and so, as well as showing his characters acting out the dilemma, he often points out the abstract moral, suggesting a growing literate separation of character and author.

The residual oral agonism of *Beowulf* seems largely untouched by literate noetics. This is not surprising, since, of all the seven characteristics of oral noetics traced in this study, agonism is one of the most long-lived. The concept of discourse as spoken, rhetorical and thus fundamentally polemical endured well into the nineteenth century in the west (Ong 2002: 466). Apart from the verbomotor worldview revealed, and the central place accorded to fame in the tales, which comes with agonistic social structures, this polemic noetic is seen most clearly in the imagery of *Beowulf*. Images tend to be polarised along traditional lines into positive and negative groups, and also to occur as clusters reflecting the aggregative nature of oral noetics, or as index symbols (such as the flagon and the *byrne*) formed of a physical object and the emotive value attached to it, reflecting the visual and emotional cast of oral thought. Here formulae drawn directly from Christian texts in Latin are absorbed without apparent strain into traditional systems of imagery, showing the power of these oral agonistic complexes in the imaginative and conceptual structures of the poet and his audience.

Though much less oral than *Beowulf*, the *Morte* is similarly committed to a system which it aims to teach as well as examine. It works with the agonistic opposites of praise and blame to persuade the audience to accept this system. In this sense the *Morte* is rhetorical, though as a secular, vernacular work it lies outside the mainstream rhetorical and ecclesiastical culture of the period. The central position occupied by 'worship' in the tales is evidence of this agonistic

commitment. An interestingly literate development is the aesthetic of goodness, following the medieval linking of the virtues of good, truth and beauty. Here beauty is associated with moral goodness rather than with usefulness, or fittedness for a purpose, which is the oral understanding. In contrast, in *Beowulf*, evil is separate from bad form; the evil is intellectual and ethical, while the bad form is aesthetic. Unferth, who is evil, still sits at the king's feet.

The final oral characteristic, *copia*, perhaps most sensitively reflects *Beowulf*'s balance of vocality. Variation is used over extended sections of narrative with great delicacy and consistency, suggesting the care of a poet still in the oral tradition but able to revise his work. The non-formulaic orality traceable in the poem in the form of appositional, explanatory and metonymic extension suggests that as Christianity was gaining currency value in the economy of vocal noetics, traditional themes and structures such as ancient Scandinavian history were fading from the *langue*, prompting a flurry of references and extensions to make them understandable to the audience. The constraints of vocality also perhaps explain the last and broadest kind of *copia* found in the poem, which is repetition of action.

Similar hermeneutic considerations determine *copia* in the *Morte*, functioning to help a listening audience follow the story. The loosening of ties to tradition, however, results in these repetitions often functioning through simply sounding traditional rather than actually linking to other episodes within the extra-linguistic tradition. The strong presence of this particular oral residue is probably due, in addition to the needs of vocality, to the rhetorical, agonistic nature of the text, since often the repetitions function largely by stimulating emotional response, simultaneously strengthening the vital author-audience relationship. The techniques of repetition Malory uses are interestingly hybrid. He makes lists, which reflect literacy, but in battle scenes particularly turns them into lists of actions, which is characteristic of orality. He simplifies the *entrelacé*ment of his sources and ties up loose ends, which is literate, yet still keeps to an episodic structure and formulaic signposting, which is oral.

Between *Beowulf* and the *Morte* not only the form but the function of poetic discourse has changed. In primary oral epic, words are acts, and make things real by their very nature. Also, as repetitions of words said before, they function as communal memory. Combining these functions, epic discourse teaches, forms and educates the human being as a communal, ethical, technological being, and provides human society with a means of giving expression to things unknown, by absorbing them into epic tales, and so into the extra-linguistic tradition and thus forcing language to expand to express them. Primary epic is in some ways quintessential language, one of the fullest expressions of its nature and possibilities. Writing, which relieves the psyche of the burden of mnemonic necessity, frees energy for the development of certain of these functions.

The first of these functions is conceptualisation, from which eventually develops analytical logic. When the fleeting spoken word is written down, and the gap between knower and known widens, language can become perceived and used as a medium of information rather than an event of creation. The opposition of the concepts expressed becomes the focus of interest, rather than the opposition of persons, and so from agonistic rhetoric grows scientific logic (Ong 2002: 482). This process is already beginning in the works studied here, as *Beowulf*'s deathbed musings on heroic worth broaden into Malory's extended critique of chivalry. This development spelled the end of primary epic, for as its didactic role narrowed and disappeared many of its specifically oral characteristics, such as *copia* and epithetic naming, degenerated into clichés quite empty of deeper resonances, however sonorous their sound. Other genres based on logic and analytical syntax developed to fulfil the didactic and prescriptive roles of epic, including the charter, the legal document and eventually the essay.

Another function of language is evolution. The elastically prescriptive world of oral epic included matter spiritual, emotional and aesthetic, as well as ethical and pragmatic, and, rooted in humanity's mystical archetypal history, satisfied our paradoxical needs for both security and adventure. Romance retained this function. One of its functions was revolution, providing an

arena adjacent to lived experience where the community's desires could be expressed, especially 'those desires which cannot find controlled expression within a society' (Beer 1970: 13). After the Age of Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the advent of depth psychology, people inhabiting a shrunken world littered on maps, with even their unconscious selves seemingly shorn of all mystery, had nowhere in the physical world any longer where such an arena could be found. Here romance shared the fate of epic, losing its emotional relevance and sliding into decadence; the exaggerated melancholy and death-pale dreaminess of the Pre-Raphaelite Arthurian world reveal that these are among the final works along this route. A new experimental literary space of this kind had to be found, and fantasy, perhaps, provides one of its last refuges.

Fantasy is a profoundly literate genre. Oral thought, because bound to preserve and transmit the known, has to avoid the unknown, and so primary oral fantasy is impossible. Once freed by the technologies of writing and printing from the mnemonic necessities of oral noetics, the mind and imagination can move from maintaining the familiar to exploring the new. Noetic contact with actuality is no longer maintained by repetition, and so the highest ideal is no longer conservatism, but originality (Ong 1971: 264). Thus, the Romantic revolution spearheaded by Wordsworth and Coleridge at the end of the eighteenth century can be seen to be the logical result of literacy on the noetic processes of the human mind. The rejection of 'poetical language' articulated by Wordsworth and Coleridge is part of this quest for originality, and is actually a rejection of commonplaces and clichés, in other words, of formulaic devices (Ong 1971: 258). The noetic advances made possible by writing and print enabled the technological advancements of the same period. From the resulting industrial power romanticism absorbed a feeling of control over nature; mountains and fens, for example, which in *Beowulf* are the inhospitable haunt of Grendel the monster, now lose their hostility, and their alienness becomes part of their attraction (Ong 1971: 279). This opens to literature new imaginative landscapes, and even new worlds. However, if the noetics of primary orality force a curtailment of human thought in one direction, the very freedom of literate noetics in other directions also leads to an

impasse, though a different one. Romanticism's endless search for the new proves self-defeating. Time, geography, our own consciousness and unconsciousness all seem now within our knowledge. We have nowhere else to go, yet the romanticism we still live by forces us to continue looking (Ong 1971: 325). This is one of the driving forces behind the development of fantasy, a realm that provides scope for novelty limited only by human imagination and a text's ability to convince. Readers, secure in an unexamined trust in the powers of technology, can afford to spend time and noetic energy on these fantasy realms. However, the noetic freedom which is literacy's greatest gift to humanity exacts other tolls also, most notably the loss of the profound sense of security fostered by tradition. In the culture of England, this is perhaps one of the reasons for paradoxically parallel traits of scepticism and nostalgia that became so evident in the Victorian period and came to characterise modernism. Seen from the noetic angle, these two tendencies are both in some way the results of the literate reaction against pervasively powerful orality. The literate rejection of the formulaic, ponderous structures of oral thought and expression leads to scepticism about traditional modes of understanding and writing humankind and our place in the universe. Simultaneously, the loss of the pervasive structure offered by tradition leads to uncertainty, and this uncertainty to a powerful nostalgia for the perceived graces and serenities of the past. This process, as mentioned above, is already beginning in Malory, and only gains strength with the further internalisation of writing.

There is another noetic reason for the flourishing of fantasy literature in the twentieth century, which can be traced back to the final death of lingering oral practices. Ong explains how the English education system for boys replaced primordial initiation and puberty rites (1971: 140) and unnaturally preserved primary oral noetics well into the literate age, until the early twentieth century, in fact, when this education style disappeared with the development of modern urban society in the west.⁴⁶ The technological, political and intellectual changes that contributed to the modernisation of education were also having other sweeping effects on the noetic environment

⁴⁶ Ong focuses on the British education system, but a similar situation presumably existed in America and on the continent, and, of course, in the colonies.

in the course of the twentieth century. The growth of telecommunications media has caused the beginning of a new noetic shift, perhaps of comparable magnitude to that from orality to chirographic literacy, namely the shift from typographic literacy to secondary orality. Secondary orality can be defined as culture founded on oral (not written) communication, but transmitted through the mass media, which depends on literate technology (Ong 1971: 299). Its characteristics, as far as we can judge since they are still developing, are paradoxically both like and unlike those of primary orality. Similarities include a return to formulae in the form of slogans and jingles, though these are more short-term, action-orientated and evanescent than the formulae of primary orality (Ong 1971: 299); secondary orality is riddled with these unrecognised formulae arising from its oral modes of existence, yet retains a cynical depreciation of clichés and fixed formulae, and a tendency to satirise them, which shows its literate roots (Ong 1971: 303). Also, since sound socialises, secondary orality is returning to a group sense and participatory activities, though these tend to be programmed rather than spontaneous (Ong 1971: 284). However, while primary orality is allied with postpubertal life, highly polemic, nearly solely male and extrafamilial, secondary orality is tied to infantilism, and possibly fills a real need left by the disappearance of initiation and puberty rites (Ong 1971: 300), and of the education system that fulfilled this need. The strong mythic and heroic symbolism of much modern fantasy literature, both consciously and unconsciously used by authors, is arguably motivated by this need.

A particularly interesting author in this noetic context is J.R.R. Tolkien. His early twentieth-century education and his lifelong study of medieval literature and culture steeped him in oral noetic patterns, and the late typographic literacy of contemporary western culture imbued him with an intense nostalgia for the gracious security seemingly presented by older oral texts. His *The Lord of the Rings* clearly shows the effects of this noetic climate. Immediately noticeable oral traits include the book's central structuring quest theme; the mythical, almost sacral presentation of time, with the quest beginning in winter and reaching fulfilment on midsummer's day; the use of many flat, heavy characters; and strong agonistic toning in

imagery and action. Tolkien's invented languages, also, form part of a noetic continuum. In *Beowulf*, traditional kennings connect the poem into the full associations of a living oral tradition. In Malory, invented names that sound traditional act as gateways into the world of Malory's tales, which is sustained by but busy breaking away from a dwindling tradition. Tolkien's languages continue this trend; they are invented, but follow real philological rules (and sometimes even borrow words, such as the names Balin and Hama, from existing languages), and so simultaneously allow a close identification between readers and the fantasy world, while assuring the reader of the world's otherness. These and other characteristics would repay further study. Such oral toning is perhaps part of the reason for the phenomenal success of the book, both when first published and now renewed by the release of the motion pictures; the increasingly secondary oral people of the West respond strongly to the oral patterns of the work.

An epic is tragic, because as oral encyclopaedia it is bound to the oral lifeworld, and so has to fulfil ritual and archetypal functions in dealing with the collision of characters with fate, which is inexorable. *Beowulf's* tragedy is mainly of this type, though it is tinged with barely-realised literate nostalgia for dying primary oral culture. Romance has a happy ending, because with literate distance it is an examination of a particular abstract quality or virtue, and so the hero cannot die unless the virtue dies too. The *Morte*, drawing on both these traditions, is tragic as *Beowulf* can never be, because it is the tragedy of the dawningly self-aware individual being destroyed by the collision of personal desires and inexorable social systems. This concern with abstracts reads like concern with the individual and so accords well with modern expectations of literature, particularly prose, while actually stemming from a completely different noetic environment. Our modern sensibility is formed by late literate noetics, where the inward turn of literate consciousness has made the individual's psyche an artistic subject itself. Malory's tales have been called the first novel. The particular position of the *Morte* along the oral-literate trajectory thus contributes to its strange modernity and continuing appeal, seen for example in the success of T.H. White's sometimes verbatim adaptation of the *Morte's* last two books in his *The Once and Future King* (1958) and the regular release of films with Arthurian themes.

Yet perhaps more central to the continuing popularity of both *Beowulf* and the *Morte Darthur* are the great figures they revolve around: Beowulf, Arthur, Launcelot and the rest. Heroes are still relevant in our twenty-first-century society, because heroism functions as an aesthetic barrier against despair; the beauty of the last stand in the face of final annihilation is at the core of martial epic, as it is of mortality lived facing the sovereign possibility of death. The happy ending is a step too far for an oral culture; its vital resurrection energy is found instead in the beauty of valour, of honour for its own sake. Honour is an oddity from an ontogenic point of view, as it ultimately serves no selfish purpose, instead ensuring the survival of society. This would seem incompatible with a modern literate society, with its intense focus on the individual. Yet the continued place in popular culture of primary oral epics, later romances and modern fantasies, in both written and visual form, demonstrates that the aesthetic of heroism still rings true for us today. *Beowulf* has appeared in Seamus Heaney's 1999 translation, and in the 1999 film *The Thirteenth Warrior*, directed by John McTeirnan and based on Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead* (1976). The Arthurian stories have inspired authors from T.E. White to Bernard Cornwall's *Warlord Chronicles* (starting with *Excalibur* 1998), and many films, the latest being Antoine Fugua's *King Arthur* (2004; [King Arthur](#). 11 June 2005: ¶1). Epic-influenced works of the twentieth century range from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which has become a cult favourite in both book and motion picture form, science fiction film trilogies like *Star Wars* (1977 1980, 1983, 1999, 2002 and 2005; [Star Wars](#). 11 June 2005: ¶1) or *The Matrix* (1999, 2003 and 2003; [Matrix](#). 11 June 2005: ¶1) and period heroic productions such as *The Last Samurai* or Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) ([Gladiator](#), 11 June 2005: ¶1). One possible reason for our continued fascination with the aesthetic of heroism is the increasingly secondary-oral nature of modern media society, which is an area which needs much study. More profoundly, however, our appreciation for a hero could arise from a deep knowledge that we are made in the image of something greater than ourselves. Beowulf and Lancelot stand as epic heroes in the long line unbroken through the vicissitudes of western society's noetic history, pointing the way to the possibilities and destiny of our human nature.

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Abstract

Epic, among the earliest and most universal of genres, is found in a developed form among the most ancient written records of cultures from China to Greece, and has been recorded as oral narrative on every inhabited continent. From these roots in Western culture a varied yet unbroken tradition of heroic narrative has grown. Epic's form has changed with human society, reflecting our literary, social and psychological development. This study aims to explore the effects in epic literature in English of one such development, namely the internalisation of writing, at two stages of this process as they are manifest in *Beowulf* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Every culture has particular noetic processes, that is, methods of structuring and storing knowledge. Writing has profoundly influenced noetic development, so that primary oral cultures (without writing), chirographic culture (with writing) and typographic cultures (with printing) are profoundly different. Parry and Lord's oral formulaic theory, and Havelock and Ong's noetic theory describe the characteristics of primary oral thought and poetic discourse. *Beowulf*'s noetic paradigm is vocality; it is written, yet still largely rooted in the oral tradition and meant to be heard. The *Morte* shows loosening ties between poetic creation and extra-linguistic tradition in a mix of oral and literate traits. This study traces in *Beowulf* and the *Morte* seven characteristics of orality, namely stereotypical/formulaic expression, ceremonial appropriation of history, standardisation of themes, epithetic identification, heavy/ceremonial characters, agonistic style and copiousness. In all seven characteristics, the early signs of literate noetics just discernable in *Beowulf* are more developed in the *Morte*, as would be expected.

Between *Beowulf* and the *Morte*, the form and the function of poetic discourse change. In primary oral epic, words make things real and function as communal memory. Epic discourse forms individuals as communal, ethical, technological beings, and enables human society to give expression to things unknown. Primary epic is in some ways one of the fullest expressions

of language's nature and possibilities. Writing, which relieves the burden of memorisation, frees energy for the development of certain of these functions.

The development, made possible by writing, of abstract conceptualisation and then analytical logic is seen in Beowulf's deathbed musings on heroic worth, which broaden into Malory's extended critique of chivalry. The opposition of concepts becomes more important than the opposition of persons, and so from agonistic rhetoric grows scientific logic. This development spelled the end of primary epic, and other genres based on logic and analytical syntax developed to fulfil its didactic and prescriptive roles, from charters to essays.

The evolutionary role of oral epic, which enabled communal desires to be expressed, passed to romance, but this genre too died with the advent of Enlightenment rationality and modern depth psychology. Fantasy, perhaps, succeeds romance in this function.

The study ends with concluding remarks about the future of epic; with the shift from typographic literacy to secondary orality, epic is showing a rebirth in film and literature, notably in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Key terms

1. *Beowulf*
2. Malory
3. noetic theory
4. orality
5. literacy
6. oral formulaic theory
7. epic
8. hero
9. *copia*
10. Arthur

Opsomming

Die saak kan gestel word dat die epos onder die vroegste en mees alomteenwoordige skryfsoorte tel. Uit hierdie grondslag het die ‘heldevertelling’ in die Westerse beskawing veelsydig en tog ononderbroke ontwikkel. Die epos hou tred met veranderings in mensgemeenskappe en weerspieël ons ontwikkeling. In hierdie studie word die invloed van een besondere letterkundige ontwikkeling onder die loep gebring: hoe die verinnerliking van die geskrewe woord die epos-letterkunde in Engels beïnvloed. Twee stappe van hierdie verinnerliking word ondersoek, aan die hand van *Beowulf* en Malory se *Morte Darthur*.

Elke beskawing ontwikkel ’n besondere begripsbou – d.w.s. hy stel kennis saam en berg dit op wyses wat aan hom eie is. Die skryfvermoë het hierdie ontwikkeling diep beïnvloed; gevolglik verskil die vroeë mondelinge beskawings (sonder die skryfvermoë), geletterde beskawings met die skryfvermoë en geletterde beskawings met die bykomsige drukvermoë grondliggend van mekaar. Die kenmerke van die vroeë mondelinge denkwysse en digterlike segswyse word deur Parry and Lord se ‘teorie van mondelinge woordgrepe’ en Havelock and Ong se ‘verstaanteorie’ verhelder. *Beowulf* is in ’n mondelinge gees geskep: die inhoud word geskryf maar is grootliks op mondelinge oorlewering gegrond, en daar word veronderstel dat dit gehoor gaan word. In die *Morte* daarenteen verswak die band tussen digterlike skepping en mondelinge oorlewering, en gevolglik oorvleuel mondelinge kenmerke en dié van die geletterdheid.

Die studie gaan in *Beowulf* en die *Morte* sewe kenmerke van die mondelinge oorlewering na: herhaalde gebruik van beperkte bekende uitdrukkings; vormlike geskiedenisomskrywing; vasstelling van ’n stel toelaatbare onderwerpe; uitkenning deur gewoontebepalende kenmerke; statige persoonlikhede; ’n strydlystige skryfwyse; en oorfloedigheid. T.o.v. al sewe kenmerke begin die vroeë tekens van geletterde begripsbou al in *Beowulf* deurskemer, en word soos verwag deegliker in die *Morte* ontwikkel.

In die tydperk tussen *Beowulf* en die *Morte* verander nie alleen die gestalte van digterlike oorlewering nie, maar ook die taak wat hy verrig. In vroeë mondelinge heldevertelling is dit woorde wat werklikheid skep en as gemeenskaplike heugenis dien. Heldevertelling gee gestalte aan die enkeling as lid van 'n groep, 'n sedelike en handvaardige wese. Dit stel mensgemeenskappe in staat om die onbekende te begin verwesenlik. In sommige opsigte is die oorspronklike heldevertelling die hoogste uitdrukking van die wese van 'n taal en die moontlikhede wat hy bied. Omdat hy die las om van buite te leer verlig, ontketen die skryfvermoë kragte wat van hierdie moontlikhede verder laat ontwikkel.

Die mens se vermoë om denkbeelde voor te stel en ontledend te redeneer het met rasse skrede vooruitgegaan toe hy leer skryf het. Dit word belangriker om begrippe teen mekaar te stel as om dit met mense te doen, en wetenskaplike redenasie spruit uit strydlystige vertelling voort. Hierdie ontwikkeling het die einde van die oer-epos beteken. Ander skryfsoorte het ontwikkel, op redenasie en ontledende sinsleer gegrond, wat voortaan die opvoedkundige en voorskriftelike rol van die epos sou oorneem: die handves, die wetsgeskrif, die opstel.

Die mondelinge vertelling het wat mense in gemeen gehad het aan hulle voorgedra. Sy bydrae tot die mens se ontwikkelingsgang het hy aan die verhaal moes afstaan – en hierdie skryfsoort moes op sy beurt weer wyk voor die aanslag van die Verligting se werklikheidsleer en hedendaagse dieptesielkunde. Dit mag wees dat die verbeeldingskrif hierdie ontwikkelingstaak nou by die epos oorgeneem het.

Die toekoms van die epos word ondersoek. Die lees van gedrukte geskrifte word tans deur 'n nuwe mondelinge oorlewering verdring, en gevolglik herleef die epos as 't ware op die in silwerdoek en in die letterkunde, in die besonder in J.R.R. Tolkien se werk, *Die Heer van die Ringe*.

Sleutelterme

1. *Beowulf*
2. Malory
3. verstaanteorie
4. mondelingheid
5. geletterdheid
6. teorie van mondelinge woordgrepe
7. epos
8. held
9. oorvloedigheid
10. Arthur