

Chapter I

The Methodological Background

1. Introduction

The present work is concerned with the way in which the poetics of the Middle English romance reflect its ultimately oral origin and mode of delivery. This means analysing aspects of the genre's poetic style such as versification, metre and stanza construction in the context of the conventional character of the language specific to the medieval verse romance. The aim of the argument is to provide a detailed analysis of some chosen specimens of the Middle English romance in order to define the different models of distribution of the formulaic material which stand behind the actual composition of the respective poems and subsequently to observe how the character of those models reflects on other aspects of the texts' poetic style.

The present chapter has as its aim to embark on an introductory discussion of the methodology from which the argument adopted for the whole study stems. Therefore the chapter has two overriding objectives. The first of these is to provide an exhaustive overview of the widest possible context of scholarly and critical work which has been conducted on the topic and to position the present study in this very context. The second objective is to define the set of underlying theoretical assumptions with which, in the following chapters, the subsequent analytical work will be conducted.

These two aims are, of course, inherently related and in fact most complimentary, since any work which aspires to contribute to a field of research which has been graced with the achievement of many powerful minds must carefully position itself *vis à vis* the state of the art research. Thus it is especially important in the area of oral-formulaic studies, which have over the course of time branched out into many differing, and eventually mutually irreconcilable, schools and approaches, which, while they

do contribute to the versatility of the discipline, also make it necessary to define strictly and narrowly the methodological apparatus as well as the precise scope and objective of each new work undertaken in the extensive critical tradition.

It will be thus necessary to define the precise meaning of the most basic terms like "oral", "literate" or "formula", which have proved to be such a useful vehicle for conveying so many divergent ideas and opinions that, having been worked on and remodeled by so many minds, they teem with so very many potential shades of meaning that anyone attempting their use under academic conditions must provide very precise ramifications which are to be applied throughout any sustained study.

The complexity of the task is made no easier by the fact that a work like the present one must of necessity bestride two basic fields of research, which had in fact, been carried out more or less independently until some forty years ago. Consequently, some gaps and inconsistencies undoubtedly exist in certain aspects of the treatment of the poetic text between the oral-formulaic studies on the one hand and romance criticism on the other. This is a natural result of the fact that oral-formulaic studies were not originally developed in the context of the medieval romance, or in fact in the context of medieval literature as such. In fact it has been frequently observed by scholars from both sides of the scholarly divide that the literature of the Middle Ages, while it is definitely one in which all questions relating to the opposition and coexistence of the respective modes of orality and literacy are vitally important for the understanding of its most basic nature, is also one which offers the most difficulty in tackling all issues relating to this area of study.

Hence the present chapter will first provide a historical sketch outlining the development of oral-formulaic and romance studies, and subsequently it will proceed to a theoretical discussion which will define the methodological framework adopted for the purposes of the study here undertaken. We will make every effort here to provide a comprehensive overview of the critical work pursued in the relevant areas, but at the same time to focus most on those studies which have the most relevance to the argument conducted in the following chapters. Therefore a necessarily subjective perspective will be sometimes adopted in the following review.

The reason for treating jointly the two frequently independent disciplines of oral-formulaic and romance studies is designed to present the developing interrelations between the two branches in the course of the last century.

2. The formative period of oral-formulaic studies

It would be perhaps no great exaggeration to say that the ultimate roots of oral-formulaic studies may be traced back to what is in a generalized way called the Renaissance humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is thus somewhat paradoxical, especially in the context of a study like the one at hand, that the appearance of the distant forefathers whom one may hold responsible for the emergence of our methodology should coincide in time with the ultimate demise of the medieval romance, not least because of the well-manifested scorn in which the Renaissance humanists held the romance genre.

It is, however, their attention to the historical context of the written text and attempts to retrieve the original sense of decorum behind an integral whole of intrinsically related elements, which, if sometimes obsessive and much marred by misconception,¹ paved the way for the academic discussion of the Homeric poems, which originated around the mid-seventeenth century.² In this discussion some European intellectuals such as François Hédelin, Richard Bentley or Giambattista Vico sought to account for the alleged inadequacies and faults of composition existing in the Homeric epics, and, in doing so, they proposed various theories which raised the issue of authorship of the poems, with some scholars suggesting to see the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as compilations of material composed by various individual poets.

While we may, with the hindsight offered by the contemporary perspective, see the obvious fault in the evident lack of interest in accounting for the possible differences in the poetic decorum between Homeric Greece and seventeenth-century Europe, what is more important is that the people continuing the discussion in the eighteenth century, like Robert Wood, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, directed their attention to the possibility of the Homeric epics being products of a culture which did not routinely use writing for the composition of literature. Thus Homer's poetry would have to be treated as one which originated in a culture markedly different from that of contemporaneous Europe, which was based on the constant use of writing for artistic activity.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the study of Homeric verse was developing with sustained momentum, there emerged two crit-

¹ For more details on the issue see the discussion by C.S. Lewis (1942: 1-65).

² This part of the present review is based on the discussion in Ong (1995: 16-20) and Lord (1960: 7-9).

ical schools which dealt with the issue in two distinct ways. The view of the Analysts, sometimes called also the Separatists, first put forward by Friedrich August Wolf, was that the epics traditionally attributed to Homer are collations of previously composed texts combined together to form a roughly coherent narrative. The advocates of an alternative view, referred to as the Unitarians, maintained that the overall quality of the poems is too high for them to be anything else than individual creations of a single mind of great poetic ability.

Quite independently from this academic debate, an increased interest in folk and popular culture as well as an increased appreciation of its uniqueness and intrinsic value for serious academic study, which were the phenomena ultimately related to the emergence of Romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth century, resulted in a significant change of approach towards the much more immediately accessible form of oral literature – the folk ballad. Thus, while the attitude of the previous eighteenth-century ballad collectors and antiquarians³ like Thomas D’Ufey, Allan Ramsay, William Shetstone or Bishop Percy, had been marked by ignorance and disregard for the cultural context surrounding their composition, the scholars or archivists who undertook to collect and study the texts of the folk ballad in the nineteenth century, like Prof. Francis Child, Peter Buchan, or Cecil Sharp, were characterized by a great attentiveness to the cultural specificity of the kind of literature they sought to preserve, and, while they did not provide a methodological framework to deal exhaustively with the popular ballad in relation to the question of orality, their effort spent on providing a rich corpus of uniquely and adequately preserved oral genre for the subsequent generations of scholars to study has proved priceless. Although the concept of the oral formula did not develop in the context of the study done on the ballad genre during the nineteenth century, some of the work, most notably the momentous task of collecting the ballad texts from their original, oral environment and linking them on the basis of themes and motifs, which was the life work of Prof. Child, would lay solid foundations for the studies of the ballad as an oral genre, which flowered in the twentieth century.

³ For more details see Heylin (1999: 8-19).