

THE ORAL FORMULA AND ANGLO-SAXON ELEGY: SOME MISGIVINGS

The purpose of this paper is, first, to draw conclusions from a formulaic analysis of twenty-five-line (actually fifty-one half-line verses) samples from two Old English elegies: "The Wife's Lament" and "The Husband's Message."¹ A particular concern will be the evaluation of the role such analysis can play in resolving the question of the filiation of the two poems. Second, I shall briefly examine some of the presuppositions underlying the application of oral-formulaic theory to the criticism of non-epic poetry.

I have followed the method of F. P. Magoun's now paradigmatic *Speculum* paper,² and my criteria for formulaicity are Milman Parry's as adopted by Magoun. Much in Parry and Magoun and their *epigoni* is statistical in orientation. What had once been a matter of subjective interpretation – the oral or literate provenance of a given text – is now held to be susceptible of resolution by recourse to the experimental procedures of an exact science. Parry's statistical comparisons³ seemed to offer irrefutable testimony in the determination of orality. Similarly, Professor Magoun notes, in regard to one of his test passages (*Beowulf* 1–25), that "despite the relatively limited corpus of some 30,000 lines – a little more than the two Homeric poems – in which to find corresponding phrases, some seventy per cent of the text of this passage does occur elsewhere." He adds that "were the surviving corpus, say, twice as big and if, above all, we had other songs of any extent dealing with anything like the same thematic material, there might well be almost nothing in the language here used that could not be demonstrated as traditional."⁴ Increase in the number of verses in the corpus would lower the proportion of non-formulaic material. The logic of this is faulty. There is no *a priori* reason for not supposing that more verses would entail a higher proportion of *hapax legomena*. Is Magoun willing to postulate a rigidly fixed thematic vocabulary, even in the face of the penchant for unique compounds in Anglo-Saxon poetry?

Further, examination of material that can reasonably be supposed to be literate in origin shows that statistics can deceive; the signed poems of Cynewulf, for example, contain a high percentage of formulaic phrases.⁵ To speak of "oral-formulaic" analysis may be to beg the question. Since formulae do not necessarily indicate orality, they must be looked upon as a purely stylistic trait. Working from intrinsic analysis exclusively, we cannot confidently discriminate between a truly oral poem and intentionally archaizing mimesis by a literate poet. In the absence of an external control (witness Magoun's attempt to enlist the aid of Bede),⁶ we must content ourselves with description rather than attribution. Moreover, we should not be persuaded that unique phrase-

ology is a deception. Even if a larger corpus were extant and in fact manifested a reduced proportion of unparalleled phrases, it would have to be admitted that the likelihood of any one poet's retention and imitation of the entire poetic vocabulary would be reduced as well.

Putting aside for the moment these theoretical issues, let us examine the evidence of the present analysis. First, there is a gross quantitative similarity: of the fifty-one verses in the "Wife's Lament" passage, some thirty, or fifty-nine per cent, are in whole or in part matched elsewhere in the corpus of Old English poetry; the figures for "The Husband's Message" are twenty-seven of fifty-one, or fifty-three per cent. The criterion of repetition within the poems is fulfilled, if not extensively: in *WL*, 5b is duplicated by 38b, 21a by 44a, and *min hlaforð* in 6a is inverted in 15a. The same or related words are quite heavily relied upon (see Supporting Evidence at *WL* 14b); note the series *geomorre* (1b), *geomor* (17b), *hyge geomorne* (19b), *geomormod* (42b); or the affinity for *-cearu* compounds: *uhtceare* (7b, note also *on uhtan* in 35a), *modceare* (40a, 51a), *breostceare* (44b).

In "The Husband's Message," there is a whole-line repeat (16 = 53) as well as significant internal echoes: *sealte streamas* (4b) – *merestreamas* (43b), *treowe* (12b) – *winetreowe* (51b), *on meoduburgum* (17b) – *meodo-dreama* (45b). But, except perhaps for the exact repetitions, these echoes are as characteristic of literate as of oral poetry.

As for the interrelation of the two poems, common formulae would be telling evidence, and there is in fact one example of this: *WL* 18b *monnan funde* / *HM* 28b *monnan findest*. Other similarities are *WL* 3b (see Supporting Evidence) *ic up weox* / *HM* 2b *ic tudre aweox*; *WL* 7a *ofer yða gelac* / *HM* 41a *on yða geong*; *WL* 33a *fromsið frean* / *HM* 42b *forðsipes*; *WL* 21b *beotedan* / *HM* 15b *wordbeotunga*; *WL* 23b *on bearwe* / *HM* 27b *on wuda bearwe*; *WL* 25a *freondscipe uncer* / *HM* 19a *freondscype frem-man*. But the great majority of these are not shared formulae. They are, rather, the sort of allusive verbal nuances one associates with literate artistry. Also, each of the fifty-one-verse samples contains five *hapax legomena* – not a sign of oral origin.

Disclosure of the repeated (or nearly repeated) elements in the poems tells us nothing useful or compelling about their possible interrelation. In fact, one might well expect a much higher degree of formulaic intersection in poems composed orally by a single author. A case can indeed be made for unity of authorship, but it does not profit from the evidence of formulaic analysis. The verbal similarities I have pointed to are more likely the result of conscious premeditation than of repetition induced by the exigencies of improvisation.

A final critique of methodology. The force of Parry's argument and of its subsequent application by Magoun to *Beowulf* and to *Christ and Satan* – two long poems – is that unlettered composition can hardly reach epic dimensions without the services of a versatile and highly

economic tradition. The poet will need to rely more heavily on formulae in proportion to the length of the poem he attempts to improvise. This makes Magoun's figure of "some seventy per cent" more convincing as evidence; one can readily imagine that the figure attests to the dependence of a singer on the tradition. In a short work, however, the factor of improvisation is much less operative. Certainly a skilled singer, one who could run on for thousands of verses without (we must suppose) serious breakdown, could easily enough hold in his mind, *in toto*, a set piece of some one hundred verses; he could review, polish, revise, rework until finally his method closely approximated that of his more educated counterpart. Thus, short, elegiac poems could conceivably attain a fixity indistinguishable from that of a written text. If the literate poet could consciously (or unconsciously) ape the diction of an unlettered composer, the latter could, in the case of short pieces, apply the file in the manner of a lettered poet. Thus, even a very low proportion of formulaic phraseology would not, *in a short work*, tell against oral provenance. The argument from metrical-alliterative serviceability is cogent only in the area of large-scale compositions. We can of course accurately characterize a style as more or less formulaic, but that will not yield anything like proof of oral vs. literate origin.

"The Wife's Lament"

Marked Text:

- Ic bis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg,
hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, sibþan ic up weox,
niwes opþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
- 5 A ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa.
Ærest min hlaforð gewat heonan of leodum
ofer yþa gelac; hæfde ic uhtceare
hwær min leodfruma londes wære.
Ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan,
- 10 wineleas wræcca, for minre weaþearfe.
Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
þurh dyrne geþoht, þæt hy todælden unc,
þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice
lifdon laðlicost, ond mec longade.
- 15 Het mec hlaforð min herheard niman,
ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
holdra freonda. Forþon is min hyge geomor,
ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde,
heardsælgne, hygegeomorne,
- 20 mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne.
Bliþe gebæro ful oft wit beotedan
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana
owiht elles; eft is þæt onhworfen,
is nu *** swa hit no wære
- 25 freondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge neah
mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan.

Supporting Evidence:

Line 1: cp. the similar, but non-formulaic, opening of *Sea*, or *Chr* 633 *bi þon giedd awræc* / *Iob. la: Bwf* 2446 *þonne he gyd wrece*; *Jul* 719 *þe þis gied wræce*; cp. *Bwf* 1065 [wæs] *gid oft wrecen*, 1723–24 *Ic þis gid be þe / awræc*, 2108 *hwilum gyd awræc*, 2154 *gid æfter wræc*. 1b: non-formulaic. 2a: *Gen* 792 *uncer sylfra sið*; cp. *S & B* II 2 *þæt he his sawle sið / sylfa bewitige*, 20 *to won þinre sawle sið / sibþan wurde*. 2b: *Bwf* 942 *hwæt, þæt secgan mæg*; cp. *Bwf* 1700, 2864 *þæt la mæg secgan*; *Chr* 317 *Ic þe mæg secgan*; *And* 851 *Ic eow secgan mæg*. 3a: cp. *Chr.* *ond usse yrmþa geþenc*; *PPs* 68.20 *min heorte gebad / heardmedwit feala / / and yrmþu mænig / eac aræfnede*. 3b: cp. *HM* 2 *ic tudre aweox*; *Ele* 913–14 *syððan furþum weox / of cildhade*, 1225 *þara þe of eorðan / up aweoxe*; *Rid* 9.10 *opþæt ic aweox*, 73.1 *Ic on wonge aweox*, 88.1 *Ic weox*; for reasons of meter, "aweox" is read by Sievers, Kluge, Sieper, Schücking, Imelmann, and Mackie – this would make the line a formula. 4a: non-formulaic. 4b: *And* 924 *ma þonne ic sceolde* (the only other example that does not straddle the caesura or line-end), 1178 *manncynnes ma / þonne*; *Met* 10.23 *ofer ðioda ma / þonne eow þearfe sie*; *Chr* 988–89 *þær bið wundra ma / þonne*; *PPs* 68.4 *hiora is mycle ma / þonne*; *Mal* 195 *and manna ma / þonne*. 5a: cp. *Gen* 1014 *wite winnan*. 5b: *WL* 38b *mine wræcsiþas*; cp. *Desc* 126 *þisne wræcsið*; *And* 1358 *his wræcsið*, 1431 *þone wræcsið*.

6a: *Mal* 224 *min hlaforð*; *Rid* 91.9 *min hlaforð wile*; cp. *Mal* 189 *his hlaforð*, 240 *ure hlaforð*. 6b: cp. *Met* 24.52 *hionnan ut witan*. 7a: *PPs* 118.136 *yða gelaac*; cp. *Sea* 35 *sealtyða gelac*; *Met* 20.173 *lagufloda gelac*. 7b: *uhtceare* is *hapax legomenon*. 8: for "hwær" + genitive + "wære," cp. *Gen* 1003 *hwær Abel eorðan wære*. 9a: cp. *And* 786 *gewat he þa feran*; *Gen* 1210–11 *ac he cwic gewat . . . feran*. 9b: non-formulaic. 10a: *Gen* 1051 *wineleas wræcca*; cp. *Bwf* 2613 *wræccan wineleasum*; *Jul* 351 *wræcca wærleas*; *FofM* 32 *wineleas hæle*. 10b: *weaþearfe* is *hapax legomenon*.

11: cp. *PPs* 76.6 *Ic þa mid heortan ongann / hycgean nihtes*. 12a: cp. *PPs* 139.2 *þurh hearne geþoht*; *Pre* 44 *þurh bliðne geþoht*; *Chr* 921 *wisne geþoht*; *Jul* 550 *þristan geþohtes*; *Wan* 88 *wise geþohte*; *Dan* 18 *druncne geðohtas*; *C & S* 205 *bliðe geþohtas*, 284 *frecne geþohtas*, 486 *balewa geþohtas*. 12b: non formulaic. 13a: non-formulaic. 13b: extremely common: 8x in *Gen* alone. 14a: the superlative adverb *laðlicost* is *hapax legomenon*. 14b: cp. in this poem the (*hapax*) participle, *longad*, in 29, also *longapes* in 41 and *langope* in 53; cp. *Gen* 1431 *hæleð langode*, for the impers. + acc. construction. 15a: *Rid* 22.3, 15 *hlaforð min*. 15b: non-formulaic.

16a: *Deor* 38 *ahte ic*; *Bwf* 487 *ahte ic*; cp. *Gen* 2626 *lyt / freonda*; *Run* 22 *ðe can weana lyt*; *Wan* 31 *þam þe him lyt hafað / leofra geholena*; *Bwf* 1927 *wintra lyt*; *And* 271, 476 *beaga lyt*. 16b: *londstede* is *hapax legomenon*. 17a: cp. *PPs* 148.14 *holdes folces*; *Deor* 39 *holdne hlaforð*;

PPs holdne drihten; *Gen* 586, 654, 708 holdne hyge; 2315 holdne freond; *Bwf* 267 holdne hige, 376 holdne wine. 17b: *Sea* 58 forþon is min hyge hweorfeð; *Ele* 1081 min hige; *And* 634 min hige; *Jud* 87 ond hige geomor; note – Grein, s.v. geomor (acc. sg.), cites hyge geomorne at *Guthlac* 1310, I cannot find these words there. 18a: gemæcne is *hapax legomenon*. 18b: *HM* 28 monnan findest. 19a: one other occurrence, at *GofM* 32 heardsælig hæle. 19b: many occurrences: nom. at *Gen* 879, *And* 1089, 1559, *Gut* 1129, *S & S* 380, *Bwf* 2408; acc. at *Chr* 891; nom. and acc. pl. at *Chr* 154, 994, *Jul* 327, *Gut* 857, 900, *Ele* 1216, 1297; note the echo of 17b. 20a: non-formulaic. 20b: non-formulaic.

21a: = 44a, inst. in the first, acc. in the second. 21b: cp. *Mal* 290 he beotode; *Jul* 137 is the only other unprefix occurrence; note these uses of gebeotian: *Bwf* 480 ful oft gebeotedon, 535–36 wit þæt gecwædon / cnihtwesende // ond gebeotedon. 22a: non-formulaic; but cp. line 12b (also with subj. verb). 22b: non-formulaic. 23a: *Sea* 46 owiht elles. 23b: non-formulaic; only three other occurrences of the verb in poetry: *Dan* 570, *Chr* 618, *Dan* 627, the latter two with the adverb eft as here. 24a: (evidently) lacunose, (certainly) unmetrical. 24b: *Wan* 96 swa heo no wære. 25a: cp. *Bwf* 2069 freondscipe fæstne. 25b: many occurrences of “feor and neah” or “feor opþe neah,” but nowhere else “feor ge neah,” though cp.: *And* 549 ge neh ge feor, *Met* 9.2 ge neah ge feor.

26a: felaleofan is *hapax legomenon*. 26b: cp. *Bwf* 589 werhðo dreogan.

“The Husband’s Message”

Marked Text:

- Nu ic onsundran þe secgan wille
 [.....] treocyn ic tudre aweox;
 in mec æld [.....] sceal ellor londas
 settan [.....] sealte streamas
 5 [.....] sse. Ful oft ic on bates
 [.....] gesohte
 þær mec mondryhten min [....]
 ofer heah hofu; eom nu her cumen
 on ceolþele, ond nu cunnan scealt
 10 hu þu ymb modlufan mines frean
 on hyge hycge. Ic gehatan dear
 þæt þu þær tirfæste treowe findest.
 Hwæt, þec þonne biddan het se þisne beam agrof
 þæt þu sinchroden sylf gemunde
 15 on gewitlocan wordbeotunga,
þe git on ærdagum oft gespræcon,
þenden git moston on meoduburgum
eard weardigan, an lond bugan,
 freondscype fremman. Hine fæhðo adraf
 20 of sigeþeode; heht nu sylfa þe
lustum læran, þæt þu lagu drefde,
sibban þu gehyrde on hliþes oran
 galan geomorne geac on bearwe.
 Ne læt þu þec sibban sibes getwæfan,

- 25 lade gelettan lifgendne monn.
 Ongin mere secan, mæwes eþel,
 onsite sænacan, þæt þu suð heonan
 ofer merelade monnan findest,
 þær se þeoden is þin on wenum.

Supporting Evidence:

Line 1: cp. *And* 648 nu ic þe sylfum / secgan wille. 1a: non-formulaic. 1b: *And* 648 secgan wille; *Gut* 465 secgan wille. 2a: lacunose. 2b: non-formulaic; but see Supporting Evidence for *WL* 3b. 3a: lacunose. 3b: non-formulaic; but cp. *Gen* 1896 ellor eðelseld. 4a: lacunose. 4b: *Pho* 120 sealte streamas; cp. *And* 196, 749 sealte sæstreamas; *PPs* 68.14 sealte flodas, 95.11 sealte sæstreamas, 76.13, 77.15 sealte yða. 5a: lacunose. 5b: “ful oft” is of course very common, and “ful oft ic” occurs frequently.

6: lacunose. 7: non-formulaic, but mondryhten min appears inverted at *Bwf* 436. 8a: non-formulaic; Sedgefield’s emendation, ofer heahhafu, is unexampled in OE poetry. 8b: *Bwf* 375–76 is his eafora nu / heard her cumen; cp. *Jud* 146 eft cumen. 9a: ceolþele is *hapax legomenon*. 9b: non-formulaic; but cp. *And* 341 Ic sceal hraðe cunnan. 10a: cp. *Chr* 1262 þurh modlufan. 10b: *Rid* 3.66, 73.8, 91.6 mines frean; cp. *PPs* 104.31 heora frean.

11a: non-formulaic; much more common with hycgan are: on mode, on heortan, mid heortan, etc. 11b: cp. *Bwf* 684 gif he gesecean dear. 12: *PPs* 100.6 hwær ic tirfæst / treowe funde. 13a: cp. *Gen* 1856 lædan heht; *Ele* 129 aræran heht, 862 asettan heht; *Dan* 228 gebindan het; though “hatan” + inf. is a very common construction, the verb most often occurs first in the line or half-line. 13b: agrof is *hapax legomenon* in poetry. 14a: non-formulaic; sinchroden occurs elsewhere only at *And* 1673 salu sinchroden. 14b: non-formulaic. 15a: *Jud* 69 on gewitlocan; cp. *Met* 12.26 of gewitlocan. 15b: wordbeotunga is *hapax legomenon*.

16: = 53. 16a: *Gen* 2543 on ærdagum. 17a: cp. *Bwf* 1177 þenden þu mote. 17b: non-formulaic; occurs elsewhere only in dat. sg. at *Jud* 167 on þære medobyrig. 18a: *And* 599 eard weardigan; *PPs* 132.1, *Pan* 11 eard weardian; cp. *Jul* 92 wic weardian. 18b: non-formulaic. 19a: non-formulaic. 19b: non-formulaic. 20a: cp. *Bwf* 2204 on sigeþeode; *PPs* 95.3 geond sigeþeode. 20b: non-formulaic.

21a: cp. *Chr* 1224 lustum læstun; *PPs* 70.7 lustum singan. 21b: *Rid* 22.16 ne lagu drefde. 22a: cp. *Rood* 26 opþæt ic gehyrde; *Gen* 507 ic gehyrde. 22b: oran is *hapax legomenon* in poetry. 23a: non-formulaic. 23b: non-formulaic. 24a: *Gen* 2167 ne læt þu þe þin mod asealcen (hyperm.), 2196–97 ne læt þu þin ferhð wesana / sorgum asaæld. 24b: *Bwf* 1908 siðes getwæfde. 25a: non-formulaic. 25b: cp. *Chr* 1381 geaf ic ðe lifgendne gæst, 1453 lifgendne gæst.

26a: cp. *Bwf* 1130 on mere drifan. 26b: cp. *Rid* 24.6 mæwes song. 27a: sænacan is *hapax legomenon*. 27b: cp. *Gen* 1966, 2096 suð ðanon. 28a: merelade is *hapax legomenon*. 28b: *WL* monnan funde. 29: on

wenum is common, see *Gen* 1027, 2700; *Exo* 213; *Bwf* 2895; *And* 1089.

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Notes

1. The count of fifty-one half-lines results from the subtraction of one lacunose verse from fifty-two in the sample of *WL*, seven from fifty-eight in the sample from *HM*. The texts I have marked for formulae are from G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. III (New York, 1936), pp. 210–11, 225–27. In compiling the Supporting Evidence, I have used C. W. M. Grein, *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter* (Heidelberg, 1912).

2. "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum*, 28 (1953), 446–67; rpt. in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963), pp. 189–221.

3. See, e.g., "The Distinctive Character of Enjambement in Homeric Verse," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 60 (1929), 200–220; rpt. in *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. A. Parry (Oxford, 1971), pp. 251–65; see esp., the chart on p. 204 (= 254).

4. Magoun, p. 195.

5. See R. E. Diamond, "The Diction of the Signed Poems of Cynewulf," *Philological Quarterly*, 38 (1959), 228–41.

6. See "Bede's Story of Caedmon: The Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer," *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 49–63.