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REVIEWS

John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1999) 280 pp., ill.

In *Homo Narrans*, John Niles juxtaposes a study of orally derived Early English epic poetry with an interdisciplinary study of oral balladry in modern Scotland. Through this juxtaposition, he challenges literary formalist approaches to medieval poetry, which argue for both literate production of complex texts and provide readings of medieval poems as if they were static texts. By comparing a folklore-based study of modern oral poetry with an in-depth analysis of the social content of the Beowulf poem, he reminds those who study medieval literature that most medieval poetic texts, as well as many prose texts, were first generated in an active oral and written process incorporating three main components: performance and counter-performance, a strong performer figure who could remember and sing/tell extended works, and a culture with book-making capabilities. Niles accomplishes this task masterfully, though he carefully provides few direct links between the medieval and modern poetry. In fact, the two topics, each of which he presents thoroughly, at times sit side by side but do not interact at all. The reader often has to make his or her own cautious connections between the two. Leaving the connections open to the reader seems to be the only feasible option, first of all, because the readership of this book could include anyone from ethnomusicology, folklore studies, linguistics, English, or history, each with their own needs; and more important, Niles must be exceptionally careful because almost any connection he might draw would be impossible to support with evidence. What he does provide is a vivid reminder that living people created these medieval poems which expressed their complex social pressures and linked both performer and audience in an active, emotional bond.

To prepare his readers to think in terms of performance rather than text, he reminds us of the modern, literate bias present within such terms as "literature," "poetry," "prose," and "oral literature." More important, he points out that Early English terms we translate as "poetry" or "song" like *giedd* and *leop* had none of this bias. For example, a *giedd*, according to Niles, can refer as easily to an incantation, a battle cry, or a poem—it refers to the heightened register rather than the form, action rather than text. He also makes clear that poetry was not just "art for art's sake," but a somatic activity which fostered community, taught morals, stored knowledge, and provided good and bad examples of behavior for different members of society, particularly the ruling class. By contrasting his work on the social functions of the Beowulf epic with the accumulation and performance of a modern ballad singer/storyteller's repertory, he allows the reader to make connections between the two processes—separated by centuries, but, he feels, still bearing a resemblance to each other. In particular, Niles emphasizes that both processes put the song/poem in an active context, and he resists allowing the surviving manuscript or broadside to obscure the traces of the long process of living performance embodied by the page.

He frequently mentions the interplay of "oral and literate"—a dichotomy, which, he explains, even a "literate" person from the tenth century may not

have made and certainly would not have framed in as black and white a manner as a modern scholar. He uses his study of balladry in Scotland to prove that vibrant oral cultures can exist and thrive alongside literate ones, and the two can interact as people write songs down for posterity or profit or as singers learn new material from printed sources. He warns readers not to forget that writing is a recent technology compared to speaking and that storytelling is an ancient art. He argues that the Early English and modern poets he studies strove for “wordpower,” the “sententious, rhythmically charged language that is uttered in the heightened register” (29), which transcends such dichotomies as “oral and literate,” “poetry and prose,” “song and speech,” and even “fiction and fact.” He argues that modern researchers must recast these “dichotomies” as “spectrums” in order to better contextualize the works they study.

After reinvigorating the view that medieval poems were active performances, Niles uses Speech Act theory and methods from folklore studies to address the questions: how and why did this group of people produce this poem/song, and what work does this poem/song do in its society? In both the Early English works and the modern ballads he finds that the texts do not simply reinforce traditions; they simultaneously question them by providing a forum through which to present conflicting views that have emerged over time. For the Early English period, one conflicting view, namely, that the Danes were both violent pirates and good neighbors, posed a problem which the *Beowulf* epic wrestles with by presenting both positive and negative Danish characters. By refusing to address only one side, these works adapted to society’s views while helping to shape those views. Niles calls this the “cosmoplastic” power of narrative—the ability of narrative to both reflect and create social beliefs by presenting conflicting views of an issue. Niles also broaches a subject most medievalists avoid—emotional and psychological response to “oral literature” in both audience and performer. He addresses at great length the idea that Scottish singers create an “atmosphere” (the “maysie,” as Lizzie Higgins calls it [49]) when they perform that evokes a sense of joy and amazement. Such a performance can also form a bond amongst the people physically sitting together in the audience, their deceased loved ones the song reminds them of, and with the historical people referred to in the song. Niles sets this emotional, community-reinforcing power of oral production before the medievalist, reminding him or her not to forget that these poems had a somatic context, even if it cannot be video- or audio-taped today.

Niles’s overarching goal of providing the basis of “a general theory of culture” (8) based on the “cosmoplastic” properties of narrative and man’s desire to shape the world through stories is ineffective for two reasons. First, in the introductory chapter his definition of narrative becomes too broad to be meaningful. Second, his predominant focus on Early English epic poetry and modern Scottish balladry prohibits too broad an application. This theory does not impede the reader, however, since it is mostly relegated to concluding paragraphs after the first chapter. After he moves beyond this general theory, he provides a brilliant interdisciplinary synthesis of secondary work to support his careful comparison of the creative processes of modern balladry and medieval epic. His application of folklore and linguistics to explore a topic previously the almost exclusive domain of literature departments will certainly spark re-

searchers to use the tools of other fields.

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