

Theme in Oral Epic and in Beowulf. Milman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition. By Francelia Mason Clark. (New York: Garland, 1995. Pp. xxxvi + 252, appendix, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-1874-X.)

Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England. Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 17. By Craig R. Davis. (New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. xvii + 237, appendices, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-2354-9.)

Bonnie D. Irwin

Volume 21, Number 1, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087771ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087771ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Irwin, B. D. (1999). Review of [*Theme in Oral Epic and in Beowulf. Milman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition.* By Francelia Mason Clark. (New York: Garland, 1995. Pp. xxxvi + 252, appendix, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-1874-X.) / *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England.* Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 17. By Craig R. Davis. (New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. xvii + 237, appendices, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-2354-9.)]. *Ethnologies*, 21(1), 251–254. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087771ar>

Woman of the Mountains, Florence Cope Bush's retelling of her mother's oral accounts of growing up in the Smoky Mountains which was reprinted by the University of Tennessee Press. Despite some similar shortcomings, both books present refreshingly honest portraits of growing up poor in the southern mountains which grip even the casual reader. In the hands of a knowledgeable teacher, these books can be used as effective tools for teaching Appalachian culture and history to undergraduates or high school students.

Reference

Bush, Florence Cope. 1992. *Dorie: Woman of the Mountains*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Michael Ann Williams
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

Theme in Oral Epic and in Beowulf. Milman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition. By Francelia Mason Clark. (New York: Garland, 1995. Pp. xxxvi + 252, appendix, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-1874-X.)

Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England. Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 17. By Craig R. Davis. (New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. xvii + 237, appendices, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-2354-9.)

Albert Lord, in *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) argued against the existence of "transitional" texts, texts that could be a product of a single creator who composed both orally and literately at the same moment of his career:

We may in actuality discover what might be called special categories of texts, but it is more than doubtful that they should be labeled "transitional," that is, part way between oral and written (p.129).

Yet *Beowulf* provided Lord with a challenge. Here was an epic that did not conform to the oral-formulaic theory quite so neatly as did the Homeric and South Slavic epics. Lord kept his definition narrow enough, however, that he could safely argue that *Beowulf*, although unusual, is not a transitional text in the way that he chose to define the term.

Beowulf nevertheless is the product of a transitional period in Anglo-Saxon poetry and culture. It contains themes and story patterns different from those of Homeric and South Slavic epics, and it is not entirely traditional in its subject matter, as two recent Garland publications, the subject of this review, convincingly argue. Each book is part of a Garland's series named for one of the two founders of oral-formulaic theory, and as participants in the continuing discussions that Parry and Lord's theories have spawned, the authors both pay tribute to and challenge the ideas of their predecessors. Each also addresses one or more of the major unresolved questions in *Beowulf* studies. Clark meets the orality/literacy issue head on in her discussion of theme, while Davis's book illuminates the pagan/Christian question.

Francelia Mason Clark addresses the idea of oral theme and *Beowulf* through a variety of means, primarily through comparison with the South Slavic epic, *The Song of Baghdad*. She begins by critiquing Lord's own definitions of theme in oral tradition as they changed and developed over time. Of particular concern is the idea of repetition. *Beowulf* has always posed a problem in this regard, because its themes are not all strictly repeated, nor are there other epics from which to draw a corpus of traditional themes. The concept of theme, Clark argues, needs to be re-evaluated for each culture; Anglo-Saxon themes do not have the same aesthetic function as those of South Slavic epic: "[M]uch of the power of the *Song* narrative comes from action; in *Beowulf* much of the power comes from emotion. Thus, instead of a second directly comparable subject, this chapter offers another subject we know is aesthetically moving" (p. 151). Thus Clark argues that the characteristics of the *Beowulf* poet's patterns are "mobile" (p. 183) and as such, they can be hard to detect.

Craig R. Davis also argues for elusive patterns of meaning in *Beowulf* as he tackles the issue of myth and legend and their relationship with the Anglo-Saxon epic. The pagan-Christian question gets a thorough review here both in the first appendix and in the scholarship which undergirds the entire study. Davis argues for a new perspective on the *Beowulf* poet, one which admits that the poet was aware of the conflict between his pagan poem and its new Christian context (p. 162): "*Beowulf* is thus neither a Christian poem nor a pagan one, nor an especially convincing reconciliation of the two world-views: it is a strange, beautiful, but terminal mutation, a short and unsuccessful evolutionary sport." *Beowulf* is more than an attempt by a Christian poet to preserve a pagan epic. Pagan mythology, Germanic legend, and the developing Christian culture all find their way into the poem, whose final lament, Davis argues, is not only over *Beowulf* the hero but the demise of traditional Germanic poetry.

Both studies situate the epic in a culture which does not neatly parallel the other epic-producing cultures generally held up for comparison, South Slavic and Homeric Greek. Clark broadens the comparative sample in her study of theme by bringing in the *Veleva of Vanua Levu* of Fiji and the West African *Sunjata* in her conclusion. One wishes in reading her text that she had extended this intriguing comparison through the whole volume, most of which centers on a comparison between Anglo-Saxon and South Slavic. Davis, rather than searching for analogues in widely disparate cultures, finds evidence to support his argument in other genres as he gathers examples of myth, legend, and history. He demonstrates how pagan myth might have given way to Germanic legend in a reverse euhemeristic move. The *Beowulf* poet then found the next leap to Christian sacred legend impossible to achieve while maintaining the integrity of the narrative. As a traditional pagan hero, Beowulf can be neither saved nor damned. Unfortunately, as Davis freely admits, his study does not forward the discussion on the probable date of *Beowulf's* composition, a date which could lend more validity to his conclusions, especially regarding possible political motivations for maintaining Germanic legend in England, despite its growing irrelevance to a Christian culture.

As is the case with many other sophisticated oral or oral-derived texts from the medieval period, *Beowulf* has often been promoted as the work of a literate author rather than a oral composer. Given the awareness of genre that Davis sees in the poem and the reflection Clark sees on the poet's part with regard to theme, one might assume their work supports the literary hypothesis. In fact, neither takes a strong stance here. As Clark states in her conclusion, her choice of a broad comparative perspective including comparison to recent oral traditions "has revealed that nothing we have seen in *Beowulf's* kinds of complexities rules out the possibility that it could be oral-traditional epic" (p. 222). On the other hand, she finds nothing that "prevents the *Beowulf* poet from having used writing to record his epic" (p. 223). What Clark does conclude more definitely is that the use of themes in *Beowulf* is a response to performance needs, indicating an oral delivery to a listening audience.

For folklorists and literary scholars alike, these two entries in the *Beowulf* discussion demonstrate the richness of this epic and also the frustrations it has caused for generations of readers. Yet each author gives us a means to steer through the confusion and emerge from the other side with a clearer understanding both of *Beowulf* and the dynamics of epic poetry in general. Davis explains to us why there is not an extensive corpus of Anglo-Saxon epic: the monsters could be translated smoothly into the Christian context, but the

pagan hero could not be converted. Clark's book then explains to us that not having other epics with which to compare *Beowulf* is not an insurmountable problem in terms of analyzing themes. The *Beowulf* poet's individual artistry, as that of all epic poets, she argues, long took a place secondary to the power of tradition. By studying the themes of this one poem within their contexts, one appreciates not only the talents and idiosyncrasies of this particular poet, but also a different concept of repetition and theme, all without having other large Anglo-Saxon epics with which to compare it.

In the end, *Beowulf* remains a poem difficult to categorize, but these two studies give us more to acknowledge in its text, its tradition, and its composer. The *Beowulf* epic tradition begins and ends with one poem, but Clark and Davis ensure that the critical tradition will live on with their provocative books. There is much here to be appreciated, some to be challenged, and all to be built upon, just as these two authors have clearly appreciated, challenged and built upon the foundations set by Parry and Lord.

Bonnie D. Irwin
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois

The Cultures of Computing. By Susan Leigh Starr, editor. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Reprint. 282 p., Index, bibliography, ISBN 0-631-19282-4.)

Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies. By Rob Shields, editor. (London: SAGE, 1996. Pp. viii + 196, index, bibliography, ISBN 0-8039-7519-8.)

According to Rob Shields, editor of *Cultures of Internet*, the Internet is "Over-hyped, over-sensationalized...[and] under-examined" (p. ix). I am not sure I agree with the latter part; these two books represent the latest in the burgeoning wave of publications dealing with the ways in which computing, computers and culture inter-relate. However, despite two very similar titles, the anthologies present two very different perspectives.

Susan Leigh Starr's *The Cultures of Computing* is already into its second printing and she describes it as having "four major themes: computers as a medium for building communities and networks; computers as a way of stretching and redefining specific cultural practices; problems in representing cultural practices for computing; questions of power and cultural conflict in