CHAPTER FOUR

“HER Y SPELLE”: THE EVOCATION OF MINSTREL PERFORMANCE IN A HAGIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

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Herknet to me, gode men—
Wiues, maydnes, and alle men—
Of a tale þat ich you wile telle,
Wo so it wile here and þerto duelle.
þe tale is of Hauelok imaked:
Wil he was litel, he yede [went] ful naked.
Havelok was a ful god gome;
He was ful god in euere trome [band of men];
He was the wiceste man at nede
þat þurte [might] riden on ani stede.
þat ye mowen now yhere,
And þe tale ye mowen ylere,
At þe biginig of ure tale
Fil me a cuppe of ful god ale;
And wile drinken, her Y spelle
þat Crist us shilde alle fro helle.
Krist late us heuere so for to do
þat we moten comen Him to;
And, wit þat it mote ben so,
Benedicamus Domino!
Here Y schal biginnen a rym;
Krist us yeve wel god fyn [ending]!
The ryme is maked of Hauelok,
A stalworthi man in a flok.
He was the stalworþeste man at nede
þat may riden on ani stede.1

The first twenty-six lines of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108 (L) Havelok the Dane provide what is arguably the fullest evocation of the voice of a reciting minstrel in Middle English literature, as the speaker calls first for silence, then for a cup of ale, and finally for his

1 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108, fol. 204r (fig. 1). For all quotations from the manuscript I have supplied modern capitalization, punctuation, and word division, and silently expanded abbreviations.
audience to join him in praising God, while announcing his subject, the bravest (“wicteste”) and most stalwart of all men, no less than three times. The lines conjure up the quick-witted and full-throated wanderer, in market square or castle hall, as he claims his space and draws together his audience. It is not surprising that scholars once took such passages more or less at face value and classified Havelok as a “minstrel romance.” The category was never fully elaborated, however, and the question of whether Havelok was supposed to have been a copy of a script that a minstrel would have memorized or read aloud, or, alternatively, was based on a transcription of a minstrel’s performance was often left obscure.2

Neither possibility is at all likely. Anyone who has tried to work an unruly audience and gain its attention knows that opening patter must remain free. A minstrel might have to call for silence once, twice, or five times; the audience might respond to the hero’s name, or not; the call to join in pious blessing might or might not be well received. A minstrel could have memorized Havelok in its entirety (and such a feat of memorization would not have been extraordinary by medieval standards); a minstrel might have read aloud the body of the text or recited it from memory (although such extended recitation would have been extraordinary); but the one part of the text that a minstrel could not have used directly would have been the opening introduction. The introduction could have served, at most, as a model of the kind of patter that the minstrel might have used.

The alternative explanation, that Havelok preserves a transcription of one particular oral performance, is equally unlikely. While committed oral-formulaists, notably Albert Lord, have perforce made recourse to hypothetical acts of transcriptions to explain how a fully and purely oral art manages to pass into writing, nothing we know about the transmission of high medieval vernacular poetry makes the

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2 Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale refer to this passage as a “minstrel-prologue,” which gives “a good idea of the conditions under which the romance was read in public” in their notes to Middle English Metrical Romances (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 1:74. J. Zupitza also assumes that a minstrel was working from the written text in his note on Havelok (“20. Vers 2933,” Anglia 7 [1884]: 155), suggesting that because the L version of Havelok apparently skips twenty lines at this point, the manuscript might have been copied from that of a wanderer, who would have needed a book in such a small format. As John C. Hirsh notes, the error is more easily explained as “an almost classic case of eye-skip” (“Havelok 2933: A Problem in Medieval Literary History,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 78 [1977]: 339–49 [341]).