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Understanding *Beowulf:*
Oral Poetry Acts

How and why was Beowulf *written down? I present a new theory of the making of this material text based on the concept of the "oral poetry act," a staged event that aims to generate a readable text of an oral poem for the benefit of a textual community. The theory, if valid, has implications for understanding the nature of* Beowulf *as a long, fully developed poem, as well as for editing archaic texts of this kind.*

PEOPLE HAVE SPECULATED A GOOD DEAL ABOUT WHO THE *BEOWULF* POET WAS and when and where the poet lived. Such questions have an obvious bearing on our understanding of a text that, more than any other, reveals the early English view of Germanic antiquity and casts light on many aspects of early English folklore and popular belief while putting the Anglo-Saxon art of poetry on magnificent display. Although some curiously exact opinions about the poem's authorship have been expressed, we cannot answer such a question with certainty, unless some unforeseen discovery comes to light. A more important question has not so often been asked: How and why did the material text of Beowulf come into being?

This question may not need asking, you may say. We have the text; is that not enough? Certainly the question does not often arise today. Of course poetry is written down, for then it can be read.

For the vast majority of people during the early Middle Ages, however, language was meant primarily for hearing, not for reading. Understanding the literature of Anglo-Saxon England can be a difficult task if one does not make an effort to comprehend the phenomenon of transitional literacy (O'Keeffe 1990) and what Walter Ong has referred to as the poetics and noetics of an oral culture (1982).[1] During the Anglo-Saxon period there were writings, and there was poetry. The two did not always coincide. Even in a high-tech society like our own, many forms of verbal art persist without people feeling a need to write them down. Parents normally admonish their children in person, not in memos; preachers most often address their audiences face-to-face (or, more lucratively, on the TV or radio), not through books; lawyers are required to argue their cases and cross-examine witnesses orally and in public, not in private briefs; representatives in Congress debate laws and spin anecdotes on the floor

of the Capitol; professors address their students in the lecture hall; secretaries and businesspeople trade jokes in the workplace; children tell lies, sing songs, and call out jump-rope rhymes; rock singers and rappers reach an audience through personal appearances, CDs, and videos; and so on. These forms of expressive culture need not be written down. If they do come to be written down, as in the *Congressional Record* or in lecture notes sold in college bookstores, it is doubtful whether such texts do, or should, displace oral communication as the primary event in question.

During the first quarter of the 700-year history of Anglo-Saxon England, the petty kings who ruled over the postcolonial debris of Roman Britain did not practice the literary arts at all, as far as we can judge.[2] Latin, formerly the language of those in power, was reintroduced to southern Britain as the foreign language of a cultural elite late in the sixth century, when missionaries from Rome established a new kind of colonial relationship with the Germanized rulers of what we now call England. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, literacy in Latin was restricted to a fairly small portion of the population. Literacy in the vernacular developed slowly from the seventh century to the Norman Conquest, receiving large boosts during the reign of King Alfred the Great (reigned 871–899) and during the Benedictine Reform of the late tenth century. By the time of the Conquest, a body of literature in English had been written down that was far larger and more diverse than the vernacular literature of any other region of Europe. Most of what remains is prose. Of the 189 major manuscripts containing Old English literature that survive, only five contain a substantial amount of verse.[3] This verse corpus, totaling close to 30,000 lines, must represent only a very small fraction of the total body of poetry that was performed aloud during the Anglo-Saxon period, but we have no way to judge.

We do not know why these poems were preserved in writing, but we can make some educated guesses. By far the greatest number of them, including the psalms, the Biblical paraphrases, and the saints' lives, are of obvious liturgical or devotional value. A few things, chiefly the poems embedded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* are of political and historical interest. A very few poems—the metrical charms—are of practical use in daily life. Several other poems seem to have been valued as compendia of proverbial wisdom. There remains a body of verse that does not fall easily into any of these categories. Here we must place *Beowulf,* together with two other narrative pieces on early Germanic subjects: one 48-line fragment from the song of *Finnsburg,* and fewer than 63 lines (two fragments) that formed part of a lost epic poem about the adventures of Walter of Aquitaine (Anglo-Saxon *Waldere*).

From Oral Performance to Written Text

A good deal of scholarship is based on the premise that *Beowulf,* together with the *Finnsburg* and *Waldere* fragments, has some meaningful relation to a tradition of aristocratic oral poetry that was cultivated during much of the Anglo-Saxon period, whether outside monastic walls or within them.[4] My concern here is with the existence of these poems as material texts. Why and how did someone, or did some group of people, go to the trouble and expense of committing to parchment a relatively "useless" and nominally secular poem like *Beowulf?*

There are three chief possibilities:

1. *Intervention by an outsider.* When a tradition of oral poetry is in flower, people who live within the tradition feel little impulse to write it down. They do not need to write down poems to preserve them because the poets preserve them very well, thank you. This is the poets' job, and they and their ancestors have been doing it for years. The impulse to preserve poems in writing comes chiefly from outside the oral culture, when another interested party happens upon the scene. The texts that result from this encounter could be called *transmutations* of the poetry, to adapt a term that Roman Jakobson has used to refer to intersemiotic translation from one sign system into another (1992). Such texts render a stream of syllables into a symbolic script that is meant for the eyes of people with literary training who then do with such texts what they will. Examples of texts that result from the transmutation of an oral tradition are to be found throughout the literature of modern anthropology and folklore: one thinks of Edmund Sapir in California, Cecil Sharp in Appalachia, and so on. These records of an oral tradition, although highly mediated, are often of high quality, for they represent the collaborative efforts of a painstaking scholar and the most gifted informants who can be found. "Cædmon," insofar as he was a practicing poet and not just a creature of Anglo-Saxon mythmaking, is an example of a singer who became adept in the art of dictation. According to the Venerable Bede (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 4:24), although Cædmon was only an illiterate cowherd, he sang a number of religious songs in the presence of the monks of Whitby, who, impressed by the songs' beauty, wrote them down. The person who translated Bede's Latin account into English during the reign of King Alfred adorned the story with a few additional words that explain how the abbess of Whitby, Hild, saw to it that his poems were written down.[5]

2. *Intervention by an insider.* It sometimes happens that persons born into an oral culture become familiar with the technology of writing, gain something of an outsider's perspective on their traditions, and make a concerted effort to obtain or, perhaps, fashion written texts of what can still be called traditional songs or stories. The motives for such intervention vary greatly: some have done it for money; some out of a desire for fame in the educated world; some out of nationalistic, ethnic, or cultural pride; some in a spirit of scholarly zeal. The texts that result from this activity are often prized not only by outsiders, who tend to regard them with a mixture of condescension and romantic celebration, but also by insiders who are both competent in the oral tradition and literate in the vernacular. Robert Burns is a modern example. Burns was an educated man who straddled both the oral and the literate worlds. In his painstaking literary and musical work for Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum,* he drew on his intimate personal knowledge of Scottish oral traditions as he combined the roles of poet, informant, and editor (Brown 1984:27–47). His career has some resemblance to that of Bishop Petar II Petrović Njegoš, the celebrated poet of early-19th-century Montenegro. Njegoš grew up in a village milieu where he absorbed many traditional songs. In time he became a monk and bishop and wrote down many of these songs, whether in a traditional style or in a more literary one (Lord 1986:30–34). The Anglo-Saxon poet "Cynewulf," whose name we know only from the runic signatures in four texts, may have been an analogous figure from an earlier time. Cynewulf's fluent formulaic style indicates that he was at home in an oral culture, and the

Figure 1. Ilija Gašljević, wealthy miller and singer of tales, dictating to the Catholic priest J. Vukelić. "Cette simple carte postale est très instructive: c'est précisément de cette manière qu'ont été enregistrés la plupart des chants populaires." [This simple postcard is very informative: it is precisely in this way that most popular songs have been written down.] Mathias Murko, *La Poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle* (Paris 1929), illustration 3. The poses struck by the two men suggest a dignified collaboration free from condescension on either side. The clothes of the two men, together with their props, have an iconographic precision that suggests someone's awareness of that most succinct genre of folklorization, the postcard.

devotional character of his works suggests that he was a monk or cleric who made use of literary sources. There is little question of Cynewulf's having dictated his poems to a scribe, for his use of runic symbols to represent both words and graphemes presupposes a visual mode of thought and reading, but he might, in a sense, have "dictated" his poems to himself.[6]

3. *Literary imitation.* It sometimes happens that people who are not born into a dominantly oral culture, or whose education has led them into very different realms, imitate the style and content of an oral poetry and compose new songs that read like traditional ones. In its crude form, the result of this creative impulse is a forgery, such as Lady Wardlaw's celebrated pseudoballad "Hardyknute" and the other factitious texts that collectors and publishers of the era of Percy, Burns, and Scott foisted on the reading public. Scott was a particularly gifted practitioner of the art of literary deception, for

certain of the texts he published in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* including "The Twa Corbies" and "The Lament of the Border Widow," have found their way into anthologies under the guise of "anonymous medieval poetry" despite evidence that he composed them himself.[7] Literary imitation need not imply deception, of course. Skilled imitators of an oral style, such as folk poet Woody Guthrie, have brought joy to many people by composing new songs in a traditional idiom (Reuss 1970). We can usually distinguish Guthrie's original compositions from traditional British-American songs by their innovative themes, partisan voice, and stylistic mannerisms, but it can take a sharp eye or ear to tell the difference. During a transitional period when a society shifts from orality to literacy—or, analogously, when an individual shifts from primary participation in an oral culture to primary participation in a lettered one—many poets imitate the oral style. They do so naturally and unselfconsciously, for oral modes of expression are a large part of what they know. The texts that are recorded during a transitional period may be written down by people with a command of the written language, but such texts show a high degree of what Ong (1965) has called *oral residue.* The bulk of the Old English poetry that has come down to us is of this kind. It is literary—sometimes obviously and even painfully so—but on occasion it displays features of an oral style.

A Learned Beowulf?

Where does *Beowulf* stand in relation to these possible modes of composition and recording? Some Old English scholars have opted for the possibility of literary imitation and have assumed or concluded that *Beowulf* is the work of a lettered poet, a kind of Bede or Alcuin who happened to take his subject from the heroic past and who wrote in English. According to this view, the poem is a *Buchepos,* rather like the anonymous tenth-century Latin *Waltharius* saga but composed in England in the vernacular. Indebted to oral tradition, the poet was an imitator, a lettered monk or cleric who knew the oral style and used some of its features to advantage. The task of the poet, in this view, was to overcome the heavy hand of tradition. True to a bias that is well entrenched in literary circles, scholars of this persuasion cite the artistic excellence of *Beowulf* as evidence that the poet could not have been a "strumming minstrel."

Although there is no way to refute this view, there is no reason to accept it uncritically. To scholars trained in anthropological theory, it may seem an example of intellectual imperialism, in that it is based on modern Western concepts of literacy and orality that, when applied to the study of non-Western or early medieval cultures, can be a source of bias seriously distorting that study. Such a condescending view of "minstrelsy" as something impromptu and disorganized, and of "tradition" as something to be overcome by individual talent, cannot be sustained. Fieldwork among practicing oral poets in Greece (*Modern Greek Heroic Oral Poetry* 1959), the Balkans (Lord 1960), South Africa (Opland 1983), and many other regions of the world has shown the art of oral poetic composition to be an organized and strenuously demanding one, depending as it does upon a singer's ability to generate strings of words quickly in a coherent sequence while observing the norms of a given verse medium.

In an oral context, tradition can be regarded as an enabling power that provides the grounds for a supple poetic technique. As a dynamic, generative set of lexical, syntactic, thematic, and narrative systems, oral poetic tradition is what permits singers to express themselves in the special language of poetry, just as, more generally, the system of language itself is what enables people to express themselves in words.

The standard view of the *Beowulf* poet as a lettered monk or cleric would be more persuasive if it could provide a clear answer to the question of why the phenomenon of *Beowulf* happened at all. The poem's deep and sustained engagement with the themes of Germanic legendry seems in no way to have been typical of Old English monastic scholarship. The poet's formulaic style is far richer and more supple than what we find in Old English religious verse. If Anglo-Saxon monks and clerics composed verse at all, they naturally gravitated to devotional subjects, often in Latin. When they followed Cædmon in trying their hand at the vernacular style, as they did in the poetic saints' lives *Andreas* and *Juliana* and the versified paraphrases of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, they came up with something different from *Beowulf* that was rather less impressive as narrative poetry.

It is not necessary to assume that the *Beowulf* poet was literate. Although the authors of most Anglo-Saxon verse were surely monks or clerics, any member of the ruling class could have sponsored the recording of a secular poem, and some might even have dictated poems themselves. King Alfred, a deeply devout man, though hardly a monk, was an accomplished author, soldier, scholar, and statesman. Besides being a pivotal figure in the development of Anglo-Saxon kingship (Loyn 1984:61–78), King Alfred has a major place in the history of English literature. He has been called the father of English prose; he is also the first English poet known to us by name whose works have come down to us fairly intact, for some of the Anglo-Saxon poetic records, including the metrical parts of the Old English translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae,* are surely his.

Thanks to King Alfred's political prominence and to the adulatory literature written about him both before and after the Conquest, we probably know more about him than about any other person from the Anglo-Saxon period.[8] During the later years of his life, after the Danish wars that had claimed the life of his elder brother Æthelred cooled, he made a self-conscious effort to gain competence in English letters, as well as Latin. His commitment to learning bordered on the heroic. Still, we should bear in mind that he may never have learned to write, a manual skill that is more difficult than reading to master. The contrast between *Beowulf* and those poems that can be ascribed to his authorship is instructive. The Old English *Meters of Boethius* are charmingly naïve pieces studded with formulaic phrases, such as "under the sky," that are used in semantically empty ways. Despite the interest that these poems have for specialists, no one with literary sensitivity could confuse them with the *Beowulf* poet's deep, brooding, richly ornamented narrative of heroic action in the storied Germanic past.

The main stylistic and substantive features of *Beowulf* fall into place, in my view, when one conceives of its author not as a "closet Virgil" who sprinkled the work with oral formulas, but rather as a poet so steeped in the style and subjects of the aristocratic oral tradition as to be able to compose works like this fluently, although only one of

them has happened to survive. This is not a proposition subject to proof—and I shall not try to prove it here—but as a heuristic device I find it persuasive.

Folklore Acts and Oral Poetry Acts

Far from working against the idea of oral composition, the artistic excellence of *Beowulf* is one factor that leads to the conclusion that intervention by an outsider—the example of Cædmon, transposed to a secular key—is a plausible way of accounting for the fact that this poem is written down on parchment. If so, then what launched the text into its momentous existence was a special instance of what we can call a *folklore act*. By this term I mean a folkloric performance (whether singing, dancing, or chair making) that is commissioned and recorded by outsiders for the primary benefit of their own textual communities.[9] Such an event can be called an act in at least two senses. First, it is a way of getting things done. With verbal arts, this means getting a text down in writing or on tape; with material culture, it means getting an artifact made and keeping a record of the means of its production. Second, the event is a small bit of theater. Like all staged events, it has its own rules and characteristics, which are not the same as those that might be found in a context where no outsider is present.

Folklore acts transpire in what Kenneth Goldstein speaks of as an "artificial" context, as opposed to the "natural" context that prevails either when there are no folklorists present or when folklorists successfully disguise their identities and purposes (1964:80–87). Sandy Ives, in his manual on "the tape-recorded interview," speaks of the use of the tape recorder to document folklore acts (1974). D. K. Wilgus uses the term "collection events" in a roughly synonymous sense (1983:373–374). Bruce Jackson uses the term "interviews" and "setups" interchangeably for this process, and he notes that "the rhetorical form called 'the interview' is different from ordinary discourse in critical ways" (1987:67). These days everyone seems reconciled to the idea that collecting folklore in an artificial context is either useful or unavoidable. Still, most folklorists would probably agree with Goldstein that the natural context is "the ideal one" for fieldwork (1964:82), while the artificial context is "valuable only for obtaining the texts and tunes of the materials themselves" (1964:87). Perhaps in part because the collection of data in an artificial context has seemed to some people a tainted enterprise, no matter how much it has been done in the past, the implications of this method for our understanding of orally derived literature have not been fully explored.[10]

As a special instance of a folklore act, an oral poetry act is what happens when a collector asks someone to sing a song or recite a poem in the presence of a scribe, a team of scribes, a tape recorder, or some other secondary audience, often in a special setting of some kind. Collectors thus become a third factor in shaping poems, after the poet and the primary oral audience, for they too have influence over what is performed. They could be regarded as the inventors of oral poems as literary artifacts, for what occurs in a natural context is simply a stream of words. Like Hild and the monks at Whitby, collectors usually have a certain kind of poem in mind and may be dismissive of other "irrelevant" kinds. They can specify that the poem is to be fully elaborated or merely summarized. They may ask poets to bring out certain aspects of their work and
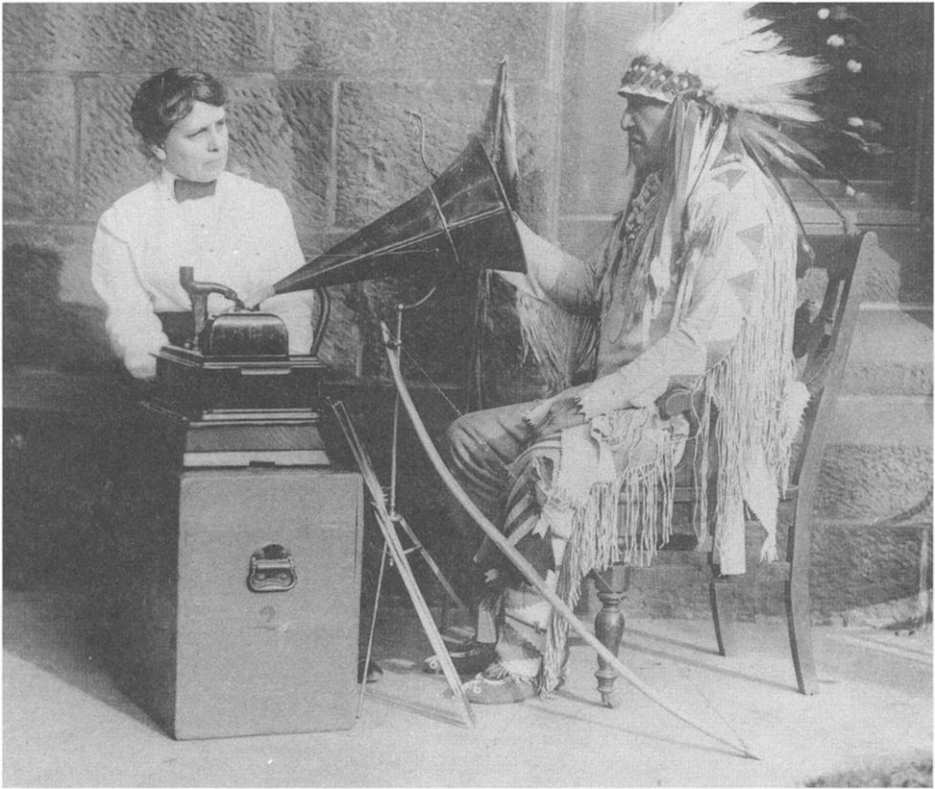
Figure 2. Frances Densmore, collector, with Mountain Chief of the Blackfoot tribe, 1906. On behalf of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, Densmore made many field trips using Edison's recently invented wax cylinder recorder, as pictured here. Like the photo of Ilja Gašljević on page 134, this photo, taken in Washington, D.C., reflects the special aims and conditions not of the "oral poetry act" but rather of what might be called the "photography act." For the benefit of the photographer and posterity, Mountain Chief has donned his ceremonial native dress (his own?). At his side are emblems of the vanishing Native American culture that Densmore was doing her best to document. The collector adopts a non-assuming pose, eyes lowered on the machine. Mountain Chief gestures as if declaiming, although any sound that he is uttering at this moment would not be registered, for he is seated before the listening horn of the machine, not the recording horn. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

to downplay others. Whether or not collectors have a clear literary agenda, poets naturally wish to please them, especially if these poets are professionals who expect to be rewarded with money or esteem. In addition, most good performers choose their words deliberately to suit a particular audience, and they are unlikely to forgo this habit without reason.

    In these ways and in others, the presence of the collector affects the product of the oral poetry event. At first, this is a scratch version of the poem as it can be read by a

community of readers.[11] If, later, a text comes to be published, it will naturally be "improved" in ways that accord with the aims of the collector, the needs or desires of its readers, the economics of publishing, and the conventions of written literature in the society in which the poem will be read. The meter may be smoothed out. Rhyme or other technical features may be made more perfect. Nonstandard or dialect forms may be replaced with standard ones; or, alternatively, the work may be "folklorized" by being rewritten into a uniform dialect. Gaps in the story may be filled in, errors or inconsistencies corrected, semantically empty phrases deleted. Capital letters and punctuation may be added; lineation imposed; pagination, headings, and sectional divisions introduced; and so on. The poem may be grouped with others on the basis of common authorship, region, genre, or subject. Through this process of textualization, collectors become collaborators in the act of poetry, not just recorders of it.[12] As the inventors of texts accessible to a literary community, collectors make myriad choices that determine the character of the product of their intervention into the realm of oral performance.

If this hypothesis is valid, then we do not have to read *Beowulf* as a literate island in a sea of much inferior oral poetry, as some scholars do, or as the unmediated gift of an oral poet's inspiration, as some romantically inclined readers have done in the past. Rather, it is a *tertium quid,* a third culture, a unique hybrid creation that came into being at the interface of two cultures—the oral and the literary—through some person's prompting. The important thing to keep in mind is that, like all oral poetry recorded before the advent of current audiovisual technology, the text of *Beowulf* would have been taken down outside the normal context of performance, in a situation where one or more outsiders were involved (cf. Goody 1987:xi).

Incidentally, this same principle of interference holds true for post-1950s fieldwork as well. Adding a tape recorder or video camera to the arsenal of the fieldworker does not eliminate the distortion introduced or induced by the presence of the observer; in fact, it may increase it. However disruptive of the natural rhythms of performance the act of scribal transcription is, a different and equally powerful disruption may occur when one asks a singer to perform before a camera, with the need for special lighting, seating arrangements, and personnel that camera work usually entails. There is almost no way to conduct one-on-one fieldwork using a video camera. Have you ever tried to carry on a natural conversation with a black box glued to one eye? The use of even a small cassette tape recorder, while allowing for more intimate sessions, signals to the informant that what is being said or performed is "on the record."

This is not at all to say that artificial collection events are less important or valid than oral performances in their natural context. The natural context is by definition unrecordable. While making field recordings, we do not need to think much about it except as an imagined or remembered base from which our session is a departure—and, with luck, an interesting departure.[13] On occasion I have introduced a tape recorder or video camera to a fieldwork situation precisely to see what would happen. Invariably the presence of such machinery lends a certain theatrical quality to the proceedings. Deciding whether this effect is for good or for ill is a judgment call, and one's answer will depend on the specific purposes of one's fieldwork. To the performer, as well as to the others who are present, the recording machine is a sign that "I take this event

seriously." Whereas day-to-day life is subject to both chance and time constraints—people come and go, and verbal events fluctuate with the eddying currents of human interaction—the collector has unlimited time to listen (or at least may wish to give this impression). Often he or she has come from far away just to record the person who sits at the business end of the mike. Once the tape recorder or camera is rolling, the "noise" of extraneous events tends to cease. The person at the center of attention will concentrate on the story or song to an exceptional degree, trying to get it right and get its meaning or importance across to people who may not understand it easily or immediately. Anyone else who is in the room can usually be counted on to respect this serious (and often pleasurable) process of retrieval and communication.

Recording sessions naturally set up dynamics of performance all their own. Although pulling folklore from some people is like pulling teeth, there are also people in the world who seldom refuse an occasion to speak, if they are among friends and regard their listeners' interest as genuine. If the collector offers encouragement, then personal anecdotes, songs, rhymes, and other forms of expression may come tumbling out of the informant in a flood that continues for hours, as long as the collector's blank tapes and patience hold out.

Like anyone else, singers and storytellers sometimes like to take a small part in a bit of theater. They may enjoy the opportunity to put their knowledge or skill on display. At times, of course, they may carry this opportunity too far. We all know of people who will put on stunts for an audience, distorting their usual manner in an exaggerated attempt at theatricality. But in my own experience, this is more likely to be the style of professional folksingers or storytellers than of ordinary tradition-bearers, whose unaffected manner of speech is grounded in respect for the family and friends from whom they learned their lore.

If all goes well, the text that results from an oral poetry act will be a "best" text that showcases the performer's talents.[14] It is often longer, more complex, more fully elaborated and more clear and self-consistent in its narrative line than a verbatim record of a primary oral performance would be, for it is the result of a purposeful effort to obtain a text that literate people will want to read.

Some disadvantages derive from the special conditions of any kind of fieldwork, of course, and the technique of oral dictation is no exception. No folklorist trained in current theory and methods can accept without anguish the prospect of the almost total loss of a natural context for performance. Nor will people necessarily be pleased to perform in artificial circumstances. Singers accustomed to performing with instrumental accompaniment will not be happy if they are asked to forgo it. A dimension of performance that is vital in a natural context may thereby be effaced. Singers accustomed to hearing the encouragement of an audience—shouts of "Yes! Tell it like it is!" or the hearty voices of friends joining in on a chorus—may not be pleased when collectors ask for silence for the scribe or tape recorder. As a result, singers may get bored and may neglect to develop certain aspects of a song or story that might otherwise be highlighted. Boredom may increase if the singer is dictating to a scribe whose pace is slow. Still, the problem of slow pacing can be mitigated by such stratagems as the use of several scribes to write alternate lines. In addition, as Albert Lord has

noted in an important study of the process of dictation, not all singers find dictation difficult (1953). Some turn the liabilities of this method to advantage:

> The chief advantage to the singer of this manner of composition [oral dictation] is that it affords him time to think of his lines and of his song. His small audience is stable. This is an opportunity for the singer to show his best, not as a performer, but as a storyteller and poet. He can ornament his song as fully as he is capable; he can develop his tale with completeness, he can dwell lovingly on passages that in normal performance he would often be forced to shorten because of the pressure of time or because of the restlessness of the audience. [Lord 1991:56]

In addition to promoting longer and more fully ornamented songs, the special circumstances of dictation can also increase the stylized character of a text. The scribe writes, and the singer speaks, in unhurried, periodic sequences. The special rhythm of dictation may thus enhance, rather than efface, those "structures that are endemic to traditional poetics, such as parallelisms and other paratactic arrangements of ideas and words" (Lord 1991:11). If *Beowulf* was recorded collaboratively by a singer and a scribe, then the special circumstances by which it was recorded may have led not only to a long and fully ornamented text, but also to a highly patterned one.

Oral Tradition and Literary Feedback

The process by which an oral poem is recorded thus has a profound effect on its nature as a literary artifact. In addition, the existence of texts that derive from oral tradition can have a feedback effect on the tradition itself. Wherever orality and literacy coexist, the commerce between them moves on a two-way street. Sooner or later, as a privileged mode of thought, the mentality of textual communities will have an influence on the thinking of everyone in a society. Folk poets whose songs are taken down and published will be impressed by this fact, as will other members of their community. The curiosity that people in an oral culture may have about the uses of written literature will in time lead to their reliance on texts for a variety of purposes, including the learning of new songs, the absorption of new subjects for songs, and the retention of knowledge that can be incorporated into songs. Any such alterations in consciousness will be reflected in the nature of what is recorded during the next round of text making; and so the cycle continues, constantly turning back on itself.

Examples of the influence of textual communities on an oral culture are not difficult to find. Here, I will restrict myself to three examples that verify the same point: that together, the collector and the poet participate in a durative, interactive system of representation, the terms of which no one person has invented.

1. During the ballad revival of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the enormous vogue of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and, a generation or so later, Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03) encouraged people all over Europe to retrieve from their memories old songs of the kinds that the culture industry had become keen to publish and the public was eager to read. When people could not remember these songs, they sometimes reconstructed or invented them. The ballad repertory of Anna Brown of Falkland (1747–1810) is a case in point. Brown had a

sharp memory for the songs she had heard in her Aberdeenshire childhood. She was also a well-educated woman, the daughter of the professor of Humanities at Aberdeen University and the wife of a clergyman. She had a taste for the ballad poetry that Percy, Lady Wardlaw, and others were publishing, and she knew how to handle the Scots literary dialect that was then coming increasingly into vogue. She dictated to her nephew Robert Eden Scott, a future university professor, some wonderful (if rather Gothic) traditional ballads that Robert Jamieson and Sir Walter Scott later published in improved form. She also wrote some original ballads in the same style—or, if she did not actually compose those ballads in her repertory that are unique to her, then at least she molded them carefully in accord with her literary sensibility. In short, Brown knew the oral-traditional style of Scots balladry well enough to be able to imitate it with success. However we wish to regard her published ballads, they soon became classics of the genre that have subsequently had a shaping influence on both singers' and editors' concepts of what a ballad is, or ought to be.[15]

2. The converging careers of Cecil Sharp and Jean Ritchie present some parallels to this history. Sharp made a career of collecting and publishing old rural songs of English derivation. He lectured successfully on both sides of the Atlantic about the social value of folkdance and folksong. By the 1920s and 1930s, a vogue for old songs and ballads was sweeping North America thanks to Sharp's charisma and to the ideological commitment of people such as Olive Dame Campbell (1882–1954), a leader of the southern Appalachian cultural revival that found concrete expression in the "settlement schools" movement. By this time, fieldworkers from the dozens of folksong societies that had sprung up in the shadow of American colleges and universities were scouring the southern mountains in search of ballads that bemused residents were often happy to provide, sometimes after having learned them from broadsides, from the radio, or from the very books that the folklorists were publishing. In time, "rooted" singers were able to make capital from their rural origins by performing traditional songs for a wide public. Jean Ritchie is a deservedly well-loved example of this phenomenon. Although she did not attend either the Hindman or the Pine Mountain settlement school, her 13 brothers and sisters did. There they gained an appreciation for the "sanctioned" traditional songs of their own family and of the region. The settlement schools had encouraged the folksong revival as early as the 1900s, and Sharp had spent many hours at Hindman collecting and teaching (Whisnant 1983:19, 51–58, 78–80, 93–97, 112–127). Ritchie's popularity has not depended entirely on her fine voice and warm personal manner, for, at least in part, her style and repertory reflect the efforts of folksong evangelists to purify and popularize southern mountain culture in terms expressive of the value system of outsiders.[16] In like manner, such stars of the country-western scene as Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn have fashioned their stage identities in response to the public's desire for skilled singers with genuine rural or working-class credentials.

3. The person whom I have recorded at greatest length in Scotland, Duncan Williamson, departs dramatically from the stereotypical aged, rural, isolated tradition-bearer. He is a strong, intelligent man blessed with a superbly retentive memory and the ability to hold an audience spellbound. He has been telling stories since his early childhood, when, ragged and barefoot, as one of 16 children born to "tinker" parents who lived their winters in a tent near the shore of Loch Fyne, he discovered that he

could entertain other children through the power of narratives. After leaving school as soon as he legally could, he traveled the length and breadth of Scotland by foot, then by horse and cart, and later by motorized transport. He made a living—by odd jobs, by "hawking" his own handicrafts, through scrap-metal dealing, as a cattleman, by gathering whelks at the shore, and by seasonal labor at the "tatties" and the berries—and he always gathered songs and stories as he went. Now in his mid-sixties, he supports his family by working as a storyteller in schools and libraries. His second wife, American-born Linda Williamson (Ph.D. University of Edinburgh 1986), has nursed into print nine volumes of stories that she tape-recorded from his oral tellings (notably Williamson 1983, 1985; Williamson and Williamson 1987). Other volumes of stories and an autobiography are on the way.

Like Anna Brown and Jean Ritchie, but in a different manner, Williamson has lived his life in a zone where two worlds intersect: an oral world, represented by his parents and most of the older "tinker" folk, and a lettered world, represented by his village school in Argyll, his wife, his contacts in the world of scholarship, and his present audiences in schools and libraries.[17] He reads when he wishes to, which is not often. He also can write, although he rarely does so except to autograph his books. His attitude toward the schools in Fife that his two young children have attended is a blend of condescension and contempt. He has seen many well-educated children in Scotland go on the dole, take drugs, or enter one of the other dead-ends of contemporary life. What he encourages in his own children is the ability to use one's wits to make a living—an ability that he finds has little to do with what one learns in school. Now in his mature years, he takes pride in his ability to be financially self-sufficient as a mediator of tales, songs, and other forms of knowledge.

Williamson serves as a good example of a rooted tradition-bearer, deeply learned in the oral traditions of his people, who is also fully conversant with the uses of print and audio recording. One of the first stories that I recorded from him concerned his adventures in the 1950s as a "fieldworker" of sorts, when he picked up a second-hand battery-driven tape recorder and used it, to his friends' amusement, to record songs and music around the campfire.[18] When Williamson was a boy, Helen Fullerton, an independent fieldworker, came to his family's tent in the woods and recorded his father and mother at some length. The event made an impression on him, and he is proud that some tapes of his mother's diddling[19] are housed in the archive of the School of Scottish Studies to this day. No one, in short, could call Williamson a naïve informant who has preserved age-old traditions in ignorance of the text-oriented, technologically advanced culture that surrounds him. When I first began interviewing him, far from being shy of the tape recorder, he would double-check to make sure that it was on. Recognizing me as a greenhorn folklorist who probably only knew about fieldwork from manuals, he confided, "You know, you get the best stuff when you just keep the machine running." From time to time thereafter he would prod me to make full use of the tape recorder: "Is it on? You'll never hear this from anyone else!" The "oral poetry act" was one that he was delighted to stage himself, for he was the director of his own *petit théâtre* with an acting troupe of one. He knew that I would work my field tapes into a book for my own textual community, and I assured him that his family would get the royalties.

Audiences Hear Words, Readers Read Texts

The possible influence of "folklore acts" on the structures of texts that we know only through writing has been studied surprisingly little, considering the likelihood that some of the major classics of Western literature derive from what Eric Havelock has called "some interlock between the oral and the literate" (1986:13). It seems plausible, as Lord, Havelock, and Janko have claimed in different ways, that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were first generated by oral dictation and subsequently revised, perhaps substantially, in the course of their written transmission.[20] The Homeric epics may be only the best-known examples of this kind of collaboration. The *Song of Roland,* the *Nibelungenlied,* and the Byzantine epic *Digenis Akritas,* together with other medieval poems of comparable kind, may also be derived from oral poets through the mediation of literate collectors and scribes (Lord 1960).

Although we can only guess by what means ancient or medieval texts were written down, we have definite information concerning some more recent epic poems. Again three examples are enough to suggest the range of possibilities.

The Finnish *Kalevala* results from a process of self-conscious collection combined with a significant amount of editorial shaping—enough shaping to lead Alan Dundes to identify the published epic as a classic example of fakelore (1984:160–161). Although such a judgment may seem harsh, it calls appropriate attention to the fact that after Elias Lönnrot collected a large number of short songs from rural singers in Finland in the late 1820s and early 1830s, he collated them, arranged them into an order that satisfied him, and used these synthetic texts as the basis for a grand epic poem (Wilson 1976:34–41). It is little exaggeration to say that Lönnrot, a practicing physician (after 1831) and one of the founders of the Finnish Literature Society, "became . . . a singer himself" (Wilson 1976:40). Even those scholars who regard the *Kalevala* as fakelore grant that Lönnrot succeeded spectacularly in his chief aim, which was to promote Finnish cultural nationalism through a work worthy of comparison with the noblest epics of Europe.

By contrast, the version of *The Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* that Avdo Medjedović dictated to Milman Parry over a period of eight days in 1936 was edited only superficially on its way into print (Medjedović 1974). Here is a straightforward example of what can result from an oral poetry act. The long-awaited publication of this text, the crown jewel of the Parry Collection, was intended to put to rest all doubts about the possibility of Homer being a singer of tales. To obtain the text, Parry asked for (and paid for) the longest song that Medjedović could provide. Not surprisingly, this gifted singer responded by dictating a text whose length and degree of ornamentation go well beyond the norms of Balkan singing in a natural context.[21] Although this text has all the marks of the traditional style about it, Medjedović did not learn the song from another singer. In fact, he had never heard it sung to the gusle. He learned it by hearing it read aloud from a printed anthology five or six times (Medjedović 1974:74). Avdo's prized version of *The Wedding Song* not only represents "a case of the effect of the observer on the experiment" (A. Parry 1966:185), but it is also a clear example of literary feedback on oral tradition.

Closer to oral tradition than the *Kalevala,* yet departing more strikingly from the norms of usual performance than Avdo's *Wedding Song,* is the stellar version of the *Mwindo Epic* from the Banyanga (the former Congo) that Daniel Biebuyck recorded from oral dictation and published in 1969. This is the longest such song that Biebuyck heard performed in the country of the Nyanga. He calls it "the most comprehensive, most coherent, most detailed, and most poetic" of them all (Biebuyck and Mateene 1969:19). This is a version of the story that Biebuyck commissioned. The poet, Shé-kárisị Rureke, was not accustomed to singing the episodes of this story as a continuous whole. As Foley has remarked, Nyanga tradition provides good examples of the *pars pro toto* principle that often governs storytelling in a natural context: any one episode of a hero tale presupposes and implies them all (Foley 1991:12, and, generally, 2–13). The idea of collecting a whole, continuous narrative was the collector's, and in this context it was a Eurocentric idea analogous to Jeff Opland's first attempt to record an explicitly narrative poem from Xhosa oral poet David Manisi (1992:413). Opland's attempt too was successful; by his own admission, the text that he recorded on that occasion reflects his interests as a scholar trained in the Western literary tradition better than it represents Manisi's usual style.

Like the text of *Beowulf,* none of the texts to which I have just referred can be taken as replicating what an audience was accustomed to hearing. All are artificial creations that came into being when skilled singers performed for text-hungry collectors. This mediated quality does not destroy the value of the texts as records of an oral tradition, for, in their content and style, they all (even the *Kalevala*) bear the traces of an oral technique and an oral-traditional mentality. They are records, somewhat removed, of a special kind of literature that can be produced only through stylized patterning. Perfected by many generations of singers for the sake of ease, grace, and coherence in performance, such poetry serves to articulate a whole people's wisdom about the world.

Just as the sponsors of oral poetry acts help create a new kind of poem, their activities tend to foster a new kind of public: a group of readers who take an interest in an oral tradition and whose response to this tradition is conditioned by readerly preconceptions and priorities. More accurately, collectors create an endless set of possible new publics, for once a text is preserved in hard copy, there is nothing but chance and changing fashions to prevent its being read for millennia. As it is read and reread, published and republished, it is revised according to changing literary standards. It may be rewritten for children. It may be made over into a new scholarly version in accordance with the latest theory of its origin. It may come to be read more often in translation than in its original tongue. What almost inevitably results from this process of transmutation is a text that is smoother than previous versions. The text fulfills the expectations of its readers, most of whom are far removed from the world of oral performance.

If *Beowulf* is in some sense the record of an oral poetry act, then the patron who sponsored this act remains as anonymous as the poet. Very likely the patron had close ties to either a monastery or a cathedral school, because professional scribes were needed to write down a poem of such length. Only in formal ecclesiastical settings were books routinely made and copied; all the technology, material resources, and

physical discipline that were required to make long manuscripts were there. As technicians of the word, Anglo-Saxon monks and clerics served the interests of the ruling class, to which many of them belonged by birth as well as temperament (Wormald 1978). They routinely learned to write down words from dictation. Throughout the Barbarian West, as Pierre Riché has remarked, rudimentary instruction in the arts of letters consisted chiefly of training in the method of oral dictation: "The master . . . dictated the Psalms the child was to write (which gave the master the title *dictator*) and then listened as the pupil read the text" (1976:465). Although only devotional texts like the Psalms were used for pedagogical purposes, once the method of oral dictation was learned, it could easily be extended to other writings.

Thanks to Bede and his Old English translator, we know that some monks wrote down vernacular poetry from oral sources, or at least some Anglo-Saxons believed that they did. According to the translator, the brethren who listened to Cædmon recite his melodious verse *æt his muðe wreoton* [wrote down from his lips]. By this means, under the direction of their abbess, they recorded poems paraphrasing Old Testament histories, the life of Christ, the acts of the Apostles, the Last Judgment, and other devotional themes. In a different time and place, given the prompting of an indulgent abbot or a motivated lord, scribes could similarly have made a manuscript record of a poem like *Beowulf,* which converted the Germanic past into a field for serious thought about praiseworthy conduct and social order in a universe governed by God. Again, the very existence of manuscript records of poems like *Beowulf* indicates that the legendary past remained of interest to clerics whose zeal for the faith coincided with an interest in their ancestors.

It would be vain, however, to speculate much about who wrote down the text of *Beowulf,* and on what occasion. To the question, Why was this text written down? perhaps only one good answer can be given: Why not? As early as the end of the seventh century in England, the practice of writing down long poems in the vernacular was well established. The poet could have been acquainted with literary models such as the *Aeneid* and Cædmon's Biblical paraphrases. The important question to ask is, By what time did the reasons for *not* writing down a poem like *Beowulf* lose their force?

As far as one can judge, ecclesiastical opposition to poems about pagan antiquity seems to have cooled by the last years of the reign of Alfred the Great and the early years of the tenth century (Frank 1982). Opinion about the Germanic past had shifted, and reference to pagan Germanic heroes no longer seemed either threatening or irrelevant. In a parallel development, songs about the pagan past were becoming infused with Christian values. Only after these momentous shifts of mentality had occurred, I suspect, did someone in a position of power see fit to reify the poem that we call *Beowulf* by preserving it in writing. Besides orienting the poem toward the needs of a Christian textual community, this person also had some awareness of being part of that new order that we now call the English nation. In company with other like-minded people, the patron knew or intuited that the ideology of nationhood could be legitimized in mythic terms through invocation of a common, pseudo-Christian, Anglo-Danish past.[22] In a period when books, like other works of art, served as tools of social order and manifestations of authority, many people could look favorably on a book that legitimized Anglo-Saxon institutions of kingship and thaneship, confirmed

Christian ideals of sacrifice, and promoted a common culture among the English and the Danes, all through a fabulous tale set in the heroic North.

Did such a text have an audience? If so, what was it? The question is not well formed. An audience implies listeners, people with ears. Listeners do not hear a text, they hear a voice. Although during the Middle Ages it was always possible, in fact rather likely, that written texts would be read aloud to a group of listeners (Crosby 1936), it is hard to imagine that *Beowulf* was meant primarily for reading aloud in a religious setting, despite all the Christian sentiments that make this poem far more than a tale of wild adventure. Nor need we suppose that the text was meant to be read aloud in a noble's court. If poems like this were part of a viable oral tradition, then people in an aristocratic household would have heard them without the superfluous intervention of a written text. More likely, the text was made to be read. We should therefore ask, What was the target readership for a book of this kind?

The thoughts of most scholars who have dealt with this question have turned to either a monastery with lax discipline or one with a special connection to the secular nobility (e.g., Dumville 1981:141). Monasteries of both these descriptions were probably not hard to find during most of the Anglo-Saxon period in one or another part of the realm. Monastic discipline was on the wane (to the extent that monasteries continued to exist at all) during the Viking invasions of the ninth century. It was on the rise during the latter part of the tenth century, when Dunstan, backed by the saintly Edgar the Peaceful (reigned 959–975), enforced reforms along the lines of the Benedictine Rule. But the theory of lax discipline 'or special connections is not our only recourse. Again our thoughts should turn to the court of Alfred and to the educational reforms for which this king is famed.

One of Alfred's major achievements was to sponsor English translations of those books of Latin instruction that he judged to be most useful.[23] By this means the first literary canon in the English language was established: the first 50 of the *Psalms,* English texts of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* and *Pastoral Care,* Bede's *Ecclesiastical History,* Augustine's *Soliloquies,* Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,* and Orosius's *Universal History.* Although all these books had a religious purpose, the last two titles (and to some extent all of them) also suited the general purposes of learning. Alfred's versions of Boethius and Orosius are more than free; they represent substantial and deliberate reworkings of the Latin originals for a new English readership, and they sometimes either suppress material that is unflattering from a Germanic perspective or add materials that are of particular Germanic interest. Soon this canon was expanded by a legal compendium (Alfred's law code), a major historical work (the several versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), and a medical encyclopedia (Bald's *Leechbook*). By the end of the tenth century, vernacular works of general interest were proliferating. These included a scientific treatise (Byrhtferth's *Manual*) and two books of popular lore concerning the monstrous races that were believed to inhabit the exotic East (*The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*). Copies of these latter two texts directly precede *Beowulf* in British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.XV, inscribed by the same person who wrote out the first 1939 lines of that poem. The people who were reading these books—and I think we can comfortably say reading, not just listening

to other people read them aloud—were either clerics with a broad curiosity about worldly matters or educated lay people.

The remarkable thing about post-Alfredian England is that such educated lay people seem to have existed. We cannot say the same about any other region of Europe. The reason for this development goes back to Alfred and his revolutionary plan—we cannot call it an achievement, for we do not know to what extent it was realized—that every freeborn male child of means should be educated in English letters. After this primary education, those young men who were to be prepared for a career in the Church were to pursue their secondary education in Latin. To the extent that Alfred's plan succeeded, there existed a lay readership for works like *Beowulf* by the early tenth century. The target readership for *Beowulf, Finnsburg,* and *Waldere,* and for other secularly oriented poems such as *Widsith, Deor, The Battle of Brunanburh, The Battle of Maldon,* and some of the Old English riddles, charms, and gnomic poems, could thus have included any monk or cleric with interests in secular subjects. As the tenth century progressed, this readership could also have included the members of a literate laity.

Regardless of whether we imagine the poem's makers and readers to have been more at home in a secular or a religious setting, the concept of an oral poetry act that would yield a hero-tale like *Beowulf,* as opposed to devotional poetry like Cædmon's, seems a fairly empty one unless we presuppose the progress in vernacular letters that is associated with Alfred's reign. After Alfred, the making of a text like *Beowulf* (and its routine copying, surely in a religious setting) makes cultural sense. Before this time, it is hard to imagine who the patron and readers of such a work would have been.

Editing the Results of Folklore Acts

One last question deserves attention. What are the consequences, for practical editing, of the theory of the making of the text of *Beowulf* that I have advanced here?

A good deal of attention lately has focused on the problem of how to represent, on the printed page, poems that are the expression of an oral tradition. One need only consult the writings of Elizabeth Fine (1984), Dennis Tedlock (1983), and the various contributors to the journal *Alcheringa* to perceive the prominence that this problem has assumed during the past 20 years or so. Medievalists too, of late, have been much concerned with the theory of editing, whether or not they believe in an oral substratum underlying Anglo-Saxon texts.[24] Just like translations and any other mediations of early literature for modern readers, scholarly editions of Anglo-Saxon texts are bound to have a limited shelf life, and fresh editions based on current critical understandings will always be welcome.

A prospective editor of *Beowulf* who accepts the arguments advanced here will make a distinction between two things: a *discourse of oral poetry* that by definition is lost to us, and a *manuscript text* that was made for literate readers. The first of these is fluid. It consists of countless acts of communication in the symbolic code of words that are voiced aloud for hearing. A manuscript text is a hard thing. It creates meaning through the code of graphemic symbols that can be pored over, studied with ultraviolet light, run through a computer, and so on. Although any written text that derives from oral

tradition will show some residual features of orality, it also has its own form based on the conventions of script.

In the past, Anglo-Saxonists who are sympathetic to folkloristic approaches to medieval literature—the vast minority, I fear—have unwittingly failed to keep this distinction straight and have acted as if the concept of *Beowulf* pertains primarily to a lost oral poem that hypothetically underlies our extant text. Certainly it is true that well-trained folklorists of the present day stress the primacy of oral context and performance. Users of the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History, for example, are told to regard written transcriptions of oral interviews as imperfect representations of spoken words: "the tape recording should be looked on as the primary document" (Ives 1974:87). This doctrine is unimpeachable. It cannot be extended into the medieval realm, however, because no documents corresponding to the folklorist's field tapes exist. All that medievalists have at their disposal are manuscript texts—if that. To speak of a lost oral performance as if it had a higher "reality quotient" and a superior aesthetic value to the actual words recorded in a manuscript, therefore, is an idle and romantic gesture.

One can imagine, if only as an ethnopoeticist's dream, a translation of *Beowulf* that reconstructs the features of oral performance in the medium of print. Using ultraviolet vision to read through the text to discover the performance that lies beneath, and making decisions in accord with an overall theory of Anglo-Saxon oral performance, the translator would find visual equivalents for such performative features as the poet's intonation, melody, pacing, and volume, as well as grunts, winks, and pregnant pauses:

```
HWAET!    We        —eh—oh—thrymmthrymm—-
       have HEARD
                       —oy oy veh—
            Danekings' glory, how they THEN
                        (those sons of noblemen,
                              lords of
                                 the tribe
              WON FAME!!
                      thrymmthrymm
```

Despite the obvious appeal of such a reconstruction, few of my colleagues in the Medieval Academy are likely to be impressed.

More attractive might be an electronic edition of the kind that has only recently become feasible. Such an edition could replace the inert *thereness* of scribal or printed texts with a multitiered, interlocking set of planes of data, all of them accessible at a computer work station. There can be as many interlocking planes as the maker of the program chooses. A program that John Foley uses, *HEURO I,* is designed to provide access to the formulaic resources of the poet's vocabulary, but the choices are literally infinite (Foley 1981:85–90). For any given line of text, the electronic edition might include such planes as the following:

   a photographic facsimile of the manuscript reading
   a diplomatic edition of this reading
   a normalized or corrected edition

textual variants, with commentary

a word-for-word translation

a smooth translation

a critical commentary

a verbal concordance showing formulaically related words and phrases

a thematic concordance

a full glossary

relevant bibliography

maps, diagrams, photographs of physical artifacts

There is scarcely a medievalist alive, whatever his or her knowledge of bits and bytes, who will not do a victory dance when such an edition is added to the scholar's toolbox. One can only regret that the project is likely to remain a utopian one, given the cost of preparing it in its entirety.

While waiting for the perfect electronic edition to arrive, editors of works like *Beowulf* can take another tack. Although this method does not depart radically from systems used in the past, it rests on a different theoretical foundation and might lead to somewhat new results. It involves accepting the manuscript document as a *text,* a special kind of artifact, a *thing* carefully woven of words (from Latin *textus;* cf. *textile*), that is, a sequence of measured utterances rendered into legible form. The manuscript text, O'Keeffe's "visible song," was produced because someone seriously wanted us to read it—or, more precisely, wanted people not wholly unlike us to read it a thousand years ago. Editors should purge *errors from the text* that have crept in during the course of its scribal transmission, still taking note of such errors for their bearing on the text's reception. There is no reason for editors to emend manuscript readings beyond that very limited purpose. Specifically, they need not regard the text as an imperfect record of something nontextual that they must use their ingenuity to reconstruct.

There are two extremes to avoid: romantic indulgence, by which people claim to know something about the unknowable, and blinkered textualism, by which people interpret the scribe's words according to standards that derive from the current mentality of print. The first choice can lead to endless speculation. The second is the road of cultural chauvinism. By smoothing out everything that is distinctive about *this particular* text deriving from *this particular* set of historical circumstances, editors will produce something whose chief appeal is that it conforms to current norms.

I recommend a middle course. Through scholarship that is period-specific and historically grounded, we can edit and read a poem like *Beowulf* in terms that are in keeping with its probable means of production. This means accepting some textual anomalies as oral residue. Scholars who take this approach will read the text as the legible equivalent of a performative event that did not need texts for its existence— even though at times, through the collaboration of patrons and scribes, singers who were masters of their craft may also have been able to generate texts, of an unusual kind, that we still read and value today.

If we take this path, we will be in a position to understand *Beowulf* better than it has been understood before. We also will have gained a basis for understanding a wide range of literary records from the past.

Notes

This article grew out of a convergence of two things: my routine research into Anglo-Saxon literature, and fieldwork that I undertook in 1984, 1986, 1987, and 1988 among members of the Scottish group known as the traveling people, or "tinkers." Field recordings from these expeditions are housed in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. I would like to thank the volunteers who joined me during the summers of 1986 and 1988 and the staff of the University Research Expeditions Program at the University of California for their assistance at those times.

Sometimes, when leading expeditions abroad, I was forced to come to terms with the impossibility of undertaking fieldwork in a natural context, or even in what Goldstein (1964:87–90) has referred to as an induced natural context. I then tried to turn a liability into an asset by exploiting the chance to stage small interactive events. My subsequent thinking about the nature of those events has led to this article. To avoid misunderstanding, I should emphasize that I am not trying to account for what collectors ought to do, but rather for what they probably did do in the past. My argument is based on hypothesis, for too often, collectors either have effaced their tracks or have done their best to disguise them.

Shorter versions of parts of this article were presented to the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA in May 1989 and to the Old English Division of the Modern Language Association of America in December 1992. I would like to thank the organizers of those sessions—Joseph Nagy and John Miles Foley—for giving me the opportunity to crystallize my thoughts.

[1]On the interplay of orality and literacy, see also Stock 1990 and Doane and Pasternack 1991. Green 1990 gives a judicious review of recent scholarship and includes many bibliographic references. Opland surveys the evidence for oral poetry in the Anglo-Saxon and early Germanic contexts (1980a) and discusses the implications of the advent of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England (1980b).

[2]For an archeologist's view of this transitional period see Hodges 1989. Hodges raises the question of whether Anglo-Saxon England came into being through conquest and migration by Germanic tribes from the Continent, as is commonly believed, or through the devolution of Roman Britain and the Germanizing of its ruling class. The answer is surely both, and the relative weight of the two impulses needs to be sorted out.

[3]See Ker (1957:xv–xix). The manuscripts that contain a significant amount of poetry are the Exeter Book, the Junius Manuscript, the Vercelli Book, the *Beowulf* Manuscript (i.e., the Nowell Codex), and the Paris Psalter. See Greenfield and Calder 1986 for an overview of Old English literature.

[4]See Chambers 1925. Research into the lost literature of Anglo-Saxon England entered a new dimension with the publication of Magoun 1953 and Lord 1960. There has been much argument over the thesis that any extant texts were composed by an oral-formulaic method (see Foley 1985, 1988, 1990, 1991). Renoir (1988) has maintained that much early Germanic verse shows evidence of an oral-formulaic technique, but he does not claim that any individual text is the result of oral composition. Irving (1989), building on the work of Ong (1982), Niles (1983), and others, has published what may be the most influential study yet of *Beowulf* as an oral-traditional work.

[5]See Magoun 1955 and Fry 1981 for useful analyses of Bede's account.

[6]Calvin Kendall has hypothesized that the *Beowulf* poet was just such a figure—steeped in the oral culture of a royal court but later educated in a monastery, he dictated the poem to himself, sometimes composing rapidly, and sometimes proceeding meditatively (1991:2–6). It is not my purpose to argue against this hypothesis; rather, I offer a concept of the act of dictation that renders biographical speculation unnecessary. Those who prefer Kendall's hypothesis must account for the differences between Cynewulf's artistry and that of the *Beowulf* poet.

[7]Harker (1985) provides a scathing review of the 18th, 19th, and earlier 20th-century practice of foisting factitious balladry on the reading public as folksong. The focal points of his attacks are texts that have been highly mediated by their collectors or editors, often without acknowledgment that changes have been made. On the editorial practices of Percy and Scott, see also Knapman 1986 and Zug 1976 respectively.

[8]See Keynes and Lapidge 1983. Lerer offers a thoughtful analysis of the stories of Alfred's literacy (1991:61–96).

[9]My notion of *textual community* is adapted from Stock, who defines it as "a group in which there is both a script and a spoken enactment and in which social cohesion and meaning result from the interaction of

the two (1990:100). In Stock's view, *script* can encompass an oral record as well as a written one, and thus groups in which oral performance is the norm can still be textual communities. I use the term *textual* more narrowly to refer to the products of writing.

[10]Oral performances in their natural context also can be theatrical. They have their own rules and conventions that are well understood by performers and their audiences. Most collectors hope, and trust, that there is meaningful continuity between what occurs in a natural context and what occurs in a collector-induced context.

[11]During the Middle Ages, scratch versions were inscribed on reusable wax tablets. Authors routinely used this cumbersome process before transferring writings to ink and parchment. The technology of script that had developed in monasteries by the sixth century was efficient enough to deal with the merely mechanical challenge of labeling and storing individual sections of books-to-be.

[12]My term *textualization* is derived from Wolf's *Verschriftlichung* (1988). Departing somewhat from his usage, I use the term to refer to the process by which a poem becomes more of a literary artifact through the process of copying and editing.

[13]An apparent exception to this rule is a fieldwork situation where—whether by birth, upbringing, or other natural circumstances—the fieldworker is a member of the group whose lore is being studied. An example of this would be an oral history project with the members of one's own family. Nonetheless, barring the use of a hidden camera or mike, one cannot capture a text from life without affecting what it is that one records.

[14]That is, the "best" text from the collector's perspective. The collector's best text may be of no use at all to the poet or to the original audience.

[15]The literature on Anna Brown is extensive (see especially Andersen and Pettitt 1979; Bronson 1945; Buchan 1972; Fowler 1968:294–331; Nygard 1978; and Pettitt 1984). Nygard, Andersen, and Pettitt take issue with Buchan's claim that Brown was a singer of tales who was in the habit of recasting her songs with each performance. Fowler takes a still more skeptical stance and is inclined to view Brown as a self-conscious literary artist.

[16]On Sharp and the middle-class manufacture of folksong in England, see Harker (1985:172–197). On Jean Ritchie and the dulcimer (as opposed to the banjo or guitar) as the instrument of choice among folksong enthusiasts, see Whisnant (1983:97–101).

[17]To repeat a point, neither of these worlds should be considered to be self-contained. Everyone inhabits an oral world during early childhood, and, as adults, even highly literate people casually enter and leave both oral and lettered realms on a daily basis.

[18]Or, to his friends' indignation, as when Williamson recorded a piper and then mischievously played the tape backwards, assuring the man that this was the way his pipes sounded.

[19]Mouth-music, at which she was expert.

[20]Lord argues that the Homeric epics were recorded by oral dictation in something close to their present form (1953). Havelock concludes that they were committed to writing piecemeal, then consolidated into their present connected wholes by editorial shaping (1986:12–13). Janko finds the theory of oral dictation to be the only plausible way to account for the textual existence of the *Iliad* (1990).

[21]Foley cautions me that, although Avdo's song is unusual, "the discrepancy between it and other texts from this tradition is exaggerated" (personal communication, 23 July 1992). He calls attention to the even longer song, *Osmanbeg Delibegović i Pavičević Luka,* which Avdo sang for Parry. However, this performance was also a collector-induced event; Parry's special ambition was to record songs of the length of the Iliad or Odyssey. On the problems of collection from oral dictation and Parry's field methods in Yugoslavia, see Lord 1954:5–15. Foley offers a succinct review of the aims and methods of Parry's and Lord's fieldwork in 1988:36–44. For a detailed portrait of Medjedovica see Lord 1991:57–71.

[22]I develop this point in greater detail in Niles 1993a.

[23]Greenfield and Calder (1986:38–67). See also Frantzen 1986 and Bullough 1972 for detailed discussions of Alfred's educational reforms and their aftermath. The extent to which Alfred was personally involved in translating these Latin classics is a complex question. What I am stressing here is his patronage and guidance.

[24]See Scragg and Szarmach (forthcoming 1994). Foley discusses the common ground between oral-formulaic theory and performance-centered theory, e.g., ethnopoetics (1992). In an article forthcom-

ing in *Oral Tradition* (1993b), I address the issue of whether irregular textual features, such as metrical anomalies, should be smoothed away, answering this question in the negative.

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