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The Social and Dramatic Functions of Oral Recitation and Composition in *Beowulf*

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In *Beowulf*, the first moments of harp-accompanied joy in the hall afflict an ominous outsider (86-90a): [1]

> Ða se ellengæst   earfoðlice
> þrage geþolode,   se þe in þystrum bad,
> þæt he dogora gehwam   dream gehyrde
> hludne in healle;   þær wæs hearpan sweg,
> swutol sang *scop*es.
>
> Then the bold demon long and torturously
> suffered great pain, he who in darkness abided,
> that he every day heard joy,
> loud in the hall; there was the sound of the harp,
> the clear song of the *scop* [singer].

Rightly, we usually think of harp-playing, singing, and recitation—that is, orally performed song or story generally—as an inherent part of life and celebration in the hall. When life and joy die, so does the clear sound of the harp. This elegiac point, to which we will eventually return, is prominent in the final third of the poem. But for now, and throughout this overview of occasions for song, harp-playing, and oral performance among the Danes, we should note the formal, social, and dramatic perspectives afforded by the *Beowulf* poet's use of harp-accompanied song in the hall. We are always in complex, emotionally fraught, and even sometimes ominously suggestive circumstances—no more so than in the very first mention of hall-songs, of repeated joy that aurally and mentally pains a creature of darkness.

The kind of song here apparently sung daily is a creation song, recited by a knower, by someone who knows the origins of things. This singer is not named, nor is he given a social title such as "þegn." He simply is someone who knows, who reflects back to the beginnings of men and recites or narrates or unfolds ("reccan," 91b—a verb Beowulf uses later when retelling events to Hygelac, saying it would take too long to recall the full detail of his requital against Grendel [2093a]).

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[1] All citations from Beowulf are to Friedrich Klaeber's third edition (1950), with macra deleted.

This singing about origins in Heorot is clearly part of a formal occasion: the triumphant completion and dedication of the great hall, a hall dedicated to the sharing among young and old alike of all that God has given Hrothgar (excluding the lives of men or the open commons or public lands). An account of the Almighty's creation of the bright earth surrounded by water, of the sun and moon, of flora and fauna of all kinds—this fittingly mirrors the human creation wherein all is good, shared, and joyful. Thus the passage establishes the highest of formal moments, perhaps almost a sacral moment, for song in the hall keyed to a great social event. Yet not all the world is in tune. What we learn here is that hall joys, song and recitation especially, have their atmospheric place in great social moments. They no doubt participate in various levels of formality—indeed some half-line collocations of *scop* and *sang* may register that formality formulaically, signaling a social ritual (cf. 90a, 467b); yet those instrumentally accompanied joys of saying and performance are inherently changeable, dramatic expressions of the social moment. They can have both hoped-for and unlooked-for consequences.

Grendel's nighttime carnage in Heorot effectively silences the harps and lyres, along with the singing voices of men. But even here sad tales (*gidd*, 151a) of Hrothgar's dozen miseries—twelve years of Grendel's criminal, unyielding depredations—circulate widely among men. While the meaning of *gidd* is narratologically amorphous in Anglo-Saxon times, in Beowulf a gidd could well be a memorized composition.[2] And in the cases of those tales circulating about Grendel's bloody crimes in Heorot, *giddu* convey fact, however elaborated here and there from performance to performance. Those tales eventually reach the Geats and Beowulf, who, when he learns of Grendel's long perpetuated, loathsome doings, immediately commands the building of a good ship and says that he will seek out the Danish king inasmuch as he has need of men (194-201). Beowulf credits absolutely the tales he hears as narratives of a terrible truth.

His unsummoned arrival among the Danes meets several diplomatic challenges: the coast watch, Wulfgar, and then Hrothgar. The king's challenge is an invitation to a feast where Beowulf might further speak his mind as matters occur to him. This is not a casual invitation to an especially royal picnic. Rather it supposes a formal moment as Beowulf sits down and a *scop* sings bright-voiced in Heorot in response to this promising warrior's advent from abroad, perhaps for the first time in twelve years: "*Scop* hwilum sang / hador on Heorote" (469b-70a). This social ritual, revived now in Heorot, momentarily at least suggests the solidarity of Danes and Geats in what is still a preliminary movement on Beowulf's part toward the task he would have Hrothgar grant him—the chance to purge Heorot of Grendel.

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[2] Anne Klinck (1992:245) thinks of gidd as cutting across our ideas of "song and speech, fact and fiction, prose and verse," and John Niles (1999:208-12) provides references, along with further critical reflections upon Klinck's overview.

What happens next further strengthens the case for an "instrumental"—that is, more than decorative and merely celebratory—use of harp and recitation in *Beowulf*. Unferth, son of Ecglaf, unbinds his battle runes and speaks in the most challenging, because insulting, way yet. Although a new fitt (manuscript division) begins with notice of Unferth, I see no reason to consider the preceding reference to bright singing and warrior joy as merely terminal atmosphere. Here bright song is both the pleasure it is and the drawing out of an unpleasant, powerful onlooker (shades of Grendel?): Hrothgar's prominent officer, who sits at the king's feet. Two instances do not, of course, make a social disposition, let alone a rule. But I think they argue suggestively that song and recitation serve in most cases as more than just local color marking a scene of celebration—the expected sonic tapestry, as it were—in the poet's dramatization of hall scenes. They do not even have to be in the hall to function in several ways at once.

Consider the Danes on horseback going to the mere's edge and then galloping exultantly back to Heorot after Beowulf's great victory over Grendel. On that occasion the mere, although welling with blood, is no frightening or dispiriting place. For them it is a fit place for the dismembered monster's death—a place, so to speak, where hell can receive her dishonored guest. As they ride away from the mere the Danes apparently praise Beowulf's deed, his glory. Their happy moan, *mænan*, appears later in connection with Hrothgar's *scop* when he speaks of Finn's sons (1067b). Such an utterance is often a complaint, a sorrowful speech in *Beowulf*, perhaps even an elegy near poem's end where the Geats would fashion a *wordgidd* about Beowulf (3172a). But here it is sheer, kinetic joy as the riders race back from the mere and pronounce the consequence of Beowulf's great deed—that surely under the heavens no shield-holder anywhere is more worthy of kingdoms than he is; he has not belied his martial appearance. This exuberant judgment, perhaps simply delivered in excited speech rather than in spontaneously composed exclamations of glory and stature, anticipates a much more formal oral composition. Hrothgar's *þegn* (thane) is a man full of great stories, one who remembers many tales, finds words, and binds them skillfully together in speaking of Beowulf's fame (867b-74):

> Hwilum cyninges þegn,
> guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
> se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
> worn gemunde, word oþer fand
> soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
> sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian,
> ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
> wordum wrixlan.
>
> At times a king's thane,
> a man covered with glory, mindful of songs,
> he who of many ancient tales
> remembered much, one word found another
> truly linked; the warrior again began
> (about) Beowulf's voyage with wisdom to recite,
> and in skillful ways to tell a fitting tale,
> in words varied.

Apparently he extemporizes the story (*spel*) of Beowulf's deed and he joins it to stories (*giddu*) he already knows about Sigemund and Heremod. His performance here is a mixture, then, of oral composition and oral recitation, the whole involving a complex stitching together of an antithetical tryptych. That mixture, I think, is signaled for us by the difference between *spel* and *gidd*. Although almost as generically amorphous as *gidd*, a *spel* need not be a song or an alliterative tale; and more often than not in *Beowulf* it is a grievous tiding. Yet in *Beowulf* it is *always* something *new*: here in the thane's artful construction, later in the sorrowful news of the mother's revenge, and later still in the messenger's speech to the wise Geats awaiting news of Beowulf's combat with the dragon.

Appropriately, oral composition here occurs in an atmosphere of triumph, even of kinetic joy. The king's thane is an especially prominent reciter and composer. Like the singer who knows the story of creation, he knows many ancient narratives (*ealdgesegen*). Probably a warrior-poet, a court poet, he composes a well wrought tale of Beowulf's exploit, where one word finds another truly bound. He also says all he knows about Sigemund's glorious monster-slaying, in later contrast to Heremod, who is in turn contrasted briefly with Beowulf. We have no paraphrase of the *spel* of Beowulf's adventure; yet the focus on how well one word "found" or prevailed upon or is obtained from another (effects implicit in *findan*) suggests the high oral art of a wise composer devising a new tale. Moreover, he demonstrates architectonic skills in linking Beowulf's adventure to Sigemund's and then contrasting Heremod to Sigemund and Beowulf to Heremod. The result is a three-part account of Beowulf in his new status as a dear friend to all men and a potential ruler.

At the great, celebratory feast in a refurbished Heorot, impressive gifts are given to Beowulf and others to his surviving Geats. After that distribution the poet mentions Grendel's evil, that he would have devoured more Geats had he been able, had not God and man's courage stopped him. Then the poet offers a sententious comment: anyone who long makes use of this world in these days of strife will experience much that is dear and much that is hateful. Following this we return to hall-joy among the Danes, as though something of the poet's tone has flavored the alcohol of Danish memories. We learn that there was (1063-70)

> . . . sang ond sweg samod ætgædere
> fore Healfdenes hildewisan,
> gomenwudu greted, gid oft wrecen,
> ðonne healgamen Hroþgares *scop*
> æfter medobence mænan scolde,
> [be] Finnes eaferum, ða hie se fær begeat,
> hæleð Healf-Dena, Hnæf Scyldinga
> in Freswæle feallan scolde.
>
> Song and music arose both together
> for Hrothgar, the successor lord for Healfdene's warriors.
> The harp was touched, speech [*gid*] often recited;
> Hrothgar's *scop* the hall-joy
> there among the meadbenches was set to speak
> of the disaster that befell Finn's sons,
> (how) the hero of the Half-Danes,
> Hnaef, hero of the Scyldings,
> in Frisian slaughter had to fall.

Here song, music, and oft-told tales lead us into what is known as the Finn episode, the consequences of which, while initially a disaster for Finn and Hildeburh, are a Danish victory (Finn's hall is sacked and Hildeburh, his queen but the Danes' princess, is brought back to her people). Here oral performance in Heorot is hardly background music and recitation generally suited to the occasion. A particular tale of marriage alliance that devolved into sudden violence and feud suggests the portentous possibilities of any moment of song-accompanied hall-joy. Songs and stories are not empty or else stereotypical narratives; they carry with them the values, histories, hopes, and mixed victories of a social people in a harsh world. Again the formal occasion opens up to sophisticated content and ambiguous implications—to a suggestiveness in this case about which *Beowulf* scholars have long contended. This essay is not the place for a review of those contentions. I will simply refer the reader to my chapter (Hill 2000: 60-67) on in-law feud in *Beowulf* for a summary of recent ways of understanding the Finn digression generally and Hildeburh's role or plight particularly. The bedrock of my view is this: for all the grief and loss it recapitulates, the *gidd* about disaster and Finn finally shapes a Danish victory, being consonant then with the apparently somber hall moment, the celebration, within which Hrothgar's *scop* recites it.

This completes a survey of dramatically emphasized oral performance, whether verbatim recitation or oral composition, in *Beowulf*. Interestingly, there is nothing comparable in the great hall scene of Beowulf's homecoming, his account of the Grendel affair in Heorot, and his rendering up to Hygelac of the splendid gifts Hrothgar gave him. Transactions in Hygelac's hall, while going well and ending in superb amity between nephew and uncle, do not involve celebratory song, perhaps because a great issue preoccupies Hygelac and Beowulf: the nature of Beowulf's possibly changed status and affiliations, now that he has served Hrothgar twice. Moreover, we learn early on in the scene that Beowulf went to help the Danes against Hygelac's wishes. We and Hygelac need new clarity about his continuing relationship to his mother's brother, Hygelac, and to Hygelac's queen, Hygd. Thus the social occasion in Hygelac's hall informs against harp-accompanied joy and celebration, glad though Hygelac is to see Beowulf again (he addresses him initially as beloved Beowulf, "leofa Biowulf," 1987b).

Still, Beowulf does mention that there was story and entertainment in Heorot after Grendel's defeat, as the friendly lord of the Scyldings rewarded him with plated gold and many treasures, once they had set themselves down in the morning to banquet (2105-14):

> Ðær wæs gidd and gleo; gomela Scilding,
> felafricgende feorran rehte;
> hwilum hildedeor heorpan wynne,
> gomenwudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
> soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
> rehte æfter rihte rumheort cyning;
> hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
> gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan,
> hildestrengo; hreðer inne weoll,
> þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.

> There was song and glee; the aged Scilding,
> well informed, from afar back recited;
> meanwhile the brave one (struck) joy from the harp,
> greeted the playful wood; at times he wrought a song
> true and sorrowful; at times a strange tale
> in rightful fashion, the large-hearted king recited;
> at times again began, in age bound down,
> an ancient warrior, to the youths began to speak
> about battle prowess; his spirit inwardly swelled,
> when he, in winters old, much recalled.

This passage more or less completes the banquet scene at this point in Beowulf's retelling of what happened. He moves on to nightfall and the arrival of Grendel's mother. Beowulf's account here of several performers, somewhat confusing in the actual number but involving at least two, one of whom is Hrothgar himself, is the poem's best instance of performance as wallpaper, as background filling the foreground. What Beowulf would do here is render the scene as innocuous as possible, clearly understating the kinds of gifts he received (dynastic) and their purport (Hrothgar's effort both to adopt and recruit Beowulf). Rather he would have Hygelac imagine the scene as largely filled at various times with a touched harp, with sad and true story (*gidd*) recited from memory, and with strange, wondrous story (*spel*) composed on the spot and unfolded according to the right way ("rehte æfter rihte"). Doing that or else adding to the mix, Hrothgar at times spoke about his youth and battle strength; his heart surged when, old in winters, he remembered much.

For the moment, Beowulf has transformed the great banquet scene in Heorot into a moody mix of story, song, and reminiscence. Again, his motive is to underplay the mute force of Hrothgar's splendid gift-giving, the four most splendid being gifts that Beowulf will soon render up to Hygelac in exactly the same order in which Hrothgar gave them to him. Beowulf will announce that Hrothgar gave him these gifts into his own possession to use as he wishes. He gives them to Hygelac in continuing favor and good will. All my kindness, favor, and joy are still in your hands, Beowulf says; they still depend upon you. He adds that he has no chief kinsmen except one, Hygelac. This is precisely what Hygelac needs to hear—that Beowulf is still an absolutely loyal, kindred-kind Geat, committed despite his two-part service to Hrothgar and the Danes and despite the portentous honor of Hrothgar's dynastic gifts (the story of which Beowulf obliquely indicates when presenting Hygelac with the corselet Hrothgar gave him).

After Hygelac's return gesture, beginning with his having Hrethel's gold-adorned heirloom, the best of swords in the Geat treasury, placed in Beowulf's lap and ending with the bestowing of seven thousand hides of land, a hall, and a princely seat, one would expect now some hall celebration. But this great moment has not followed a great victory nor does it celebrate a founding or else inaugural occasion. Rather it has become a marvelous manifestation of retainer-lord and great kin to greater kin amity, the immediate outcome of which is a notable division of royal lands. This is a high political outcome, a happy, public close to the hall scene, but apparently no stimulus to song, harp-playing, or story.

Indeed, the only occasions for either new story (*spel*) or established composition (*gidd*) in the poem's last third are sad ones, beginning with Beowulf's account of the old man who has to live through a young son's riding upon the gallows. He can only mourn, lament: "þonne he gyd wrece, / sarigne sang" ("then he wants to recite a tale, a sorrowful song," 2446b-47a). When he looks upon his son's dwelling some of the conventional content of that lament becomes clear: there is no sound of the harp, no joy or sport in the yard as there once was (2458b-59). All is stillness, a motif keyed in part to the cessation of activity—play, sport, harp-touching—anticipated already in the lament of the last survivor, where among other activities that are no more we find neither harp-joy, nor mirth, nor play of the glee-wood (2262b-63a). The cessation of the harp marks the end of joy and even life. The messenger that Wiglaf sends to the Geats after Beowulf's death tells his listeners that he now anticipates, among other things, no harp music to wake the warriors in the mornings ahead. Rather the raven will awaken them as it tells the wolf how it has stripped human bodies of their flesh.

The messenger's long speech is both a "new *spel*" and finally a "hateful *spel*." In being so it is a true tale and finally hateful, with very little that is false in it. Presumably it is composed on the spot and so is a kind of impromptu performance, despite containing no legendary content, no recall of sad and true stories or strange tales, no origin myths, and no reminiscences about anyone's youth. Rather it combines accounts of past feuds with Merowingians and Swedes in such a way as to prophesy their renewal in the future, once news of Beowulf's death circulates abroad. The messenger's is a kind of vatic performance, albeit rationalized in terms of specific instances of feud and hostility rather than drawn from a deep vision. The vatic possibilities for the poet in Norse tradition do not carry over to the Anglo-Saxons generally or to the *Beowulf* poet (see Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:91-96).

A final reference to composition, again within a scene of lament, may occur at poem's end. There (3171-72a) the Geats want to utter sad songs and speak of Beowulf. But the corruption of the passage is too great for clarity. Still, if they do utter sad songs, these would be praise songs in an elegiac mode, perhaps; they may even be songs that fill out the reported superlatives with which the Geats honor their dead king—that he was, among worldly kings, the most generous and fair-minded of men, to his people the most supportive and kindred-kind, and the most eager for renown.

According to an Anglo-Saxon gnome in *The Maxims,* all men have some longing, although this is less true for the one who knows many songs and can work the harp with his hands (Krapp and Dobbie 1966:162, 169-71):

> Longað þonne þy læs   þe him con leoþa worn,
> oþþe mid hondum con   hearpan gretan;
> hafað him his gliwes giefe,   þe him god sealde.
>
> Longs then the less he who knows many songs,
> or else with hands knows how to greet the harp;
> has with him the gift of music, that which to him god gave.

Having this gift is consoling. The *Beowulf* poet apparently agrees, as he removes moments of harp-playing, music, and celebratory story from the increasingly elegiac last third of the poem. Oral performance is still possible, indeed fitting near poem's end in fixed praise of Beowulf (possible in *wordgidd*, 3172b). While here the social context of story is all too reduced to the functioning and consolation of lament, if we think of the final superlatives as themes for their narratives of praise, praise that takes in Beowulf's kingship and bold works, that judges well his deeds, then we can say that even here story and song of some sort contain the deep values of these people, as they have come to condense those values into the superlatives by which they, those hearth companions, speak of their lord. Beyond this, for the Geats prospectively if the messenger anticipates rightly, future mornings, while not bringing clear annihilation, will certainly require movement and spear-held vigilance; the Geats will be cold and embattled; and their morning songs will be those of ravens chillingly announcing the previous day's carrion feast. No more the harp, no more a bright hall—at least not for a long time as, spear-armed, men and maidens move from place to place (3016b-23a):

>   ne mægð scyne
> habban on healse   hringweorðunge,
> ac sceal geomormod,   golde bereafod

oft nalles æne   elland tredan,
nu se herewisa   hleahtor alegde,
gamen ond gleodream.   Forðon sceal gar wesan
monig morgenceald   mundum bewunden,
hæfen on handa.

nor the maid glittering
have on her neck the worthy ring;
instead she shall, mournful of mind, deprived of gold,
often—not only once—tread a foreign country,
now that the leader of the army has laid aside laughter,
joy and pleasure. Therefore shall many a spear be
morning-cold, with hands wound around,
raised in hands.

For them there will be neither celebration nor consolation through the gift of story, music, and song.

Addendum

While the images of the singer, reciter, and composer we can gather from the poem suggest prominence at court, the poet is never more specific than when calling the performer Hrothgar's thane or Hrothgar's *scop*. The court *scop* may have sat at Hrothgar's knee, although the only figure so noted is Unferth and he is not said to be a *scop*. About the status of the late Germanic court poets or the *scop* we in fact know very little. What evidence we can gather, as Chadwick especially has done in *The Heroic Age* (1926:ch. 5), tells us that certainly the maker of tales celebrating the exploits and victories of great warriors and kings existed in Germanic societies. The *scop* is something more than our high medieval minstrel or our later ballad singer, something more or different from even the well-connected *jongleur* in thirteenth-century northern France (see Baldwin 1997). Nothing of the trivial or licentious entertainer hangs upon him individually or upon him as the conduit of tradition (where, as John Miles Foley [1999:50] has convincingly noted, some modern and classical singers situate themselves, even invoking bardic lineages).

While, as Roberta Frank (1993) has wittily and devastatingly noted, we have no extra-poetical testimony to the character and manner of an actual, Anglo-Saxon singer, still in *Beowulf*, given its depiction of a stratified society with wealthy lords and kings, a bard can be in a king's retinue, might in fact be a warrior, or might be so skilled, so laden with vaunts and old stories, that he can specialize. As well as fighting, he can make the fashioning of poems his service to the king, who will, if truly noble, famous, and hoping for more, reward him. Ruth Finnegan (1977:170-200) notes similar social functions for oral singers in different times and places—although, globally, the social position of oral singers can vary greatly from society to society and can be multifarious within a given society. Many societies with chiefs or kings have court singers; many do not. Where court singers exist, so might wandering or freelance singers. In some societies singers form a special class and go through and control their own training; in others nearly everyone is expected to show some skill at oral song or narrative. In *Beowulf*, oral narrative and song may be separate performances, but the knowledge involved does seem to be a specialist's (as with the creation singer and the thane who remembers many ancient narratives). Hrothgar is said to recite, perhaps, but no other king does. Rather a *scop* will, or a king's thane, or someone who knows what to recite and how. Special inspiration is not mentioned.

While the king or lord may also know how to recite, as Hrothgar seems to, he can hardly sing his own praises and preserve his nobility (except perhaps in a *flyting*, or verbal contest). The reward he gives the *scop* who composes praise, then, would be for a task he can not assume himself. That reward should be handsome, amounting to worthy gifts of rings, gold, or land. In this respect the *scop* was or could become aristocratic—a hero not of sword and corselet, or not of those alone, but of interlocked words, having a facility for and a storehouse of vaunts, boasts, and ancient narratives.

No doubt the court *scop* or singer, if the Old English poems *Deor* and *Widsith* speak to this at all, could be a praise singer and both rise and fall in favor. Although initially tied to a particular lord or court patron, such as a queen, he might wander from land to land seeking out generous lords, kings, and queens who would have their praises sung and who might like to hear the praises of comparable men and noble women. These latter praises in particular are the ways in which the *scop*, who never actually has to leave his court, can travel vicariously and heroically: through the great stories of those who have won renown for their prowess, their good customs, and their generosity. To narrate is to know; to know many stories is to have power and a kind of honor, an honor one can either confer or else withhold from those who know less yet who desire something about themselves translated into the truth of story. In this sense the *scop*'s *gidd*-hoard is both arsenal and treasury—word-gold given for gifts in return or else withheld in implicit blame and defacto defamation.

Anthropological parallels abound but few seem very close to the sparse evidence we have of the Anglo-Saxon court *scop*. Some singers can acquire inheritance rights (cf. Irvine 1978) and others, at least in now historically remote African societies, may have had no special status socially and no particular power. Still, in some instances bards may have been attached to or been part of the dominant family in the region (cf. Biebuyck 1972:261, 278).

Although operating, again, in a very different culture, a *scop* who has anything like Widsith's range can wield important social power given the fame he can confer on particularly generous lords or kings. A king widely sung and nobly compared to illustrious peers and figures of legend is one to whom many retainers and would-be servants might come. For such a king, a court *scop* is important enough to be an official, a man of rank and status. In an honor society if rank can be achieved, it can always be undermined as well, even lost. For the *scop*, though, one wonders how this happens? By losing to a more skillful competitor? Perhaps the *scop* can take some kind of umbrage and insult his lord in a satiric song, as seems the case at times with Old Norse skaldic poets, most of whom come from notable families, and some of whom sing their way into the service of and an advisory relationship with a powerful chieftain or king (Hollander 1968:6-7). Or a retainer-*scop* might be exiled for not fulfilling his service either at court or with sword and spear, being thereby effectively replaced by others in all of his functions. Certainly other retainers might become preferred for their greater qualities and deeds. They might even receive gifts taken back from the previous singer. Deor thinks this is unjust, especially in the case of a gift of land. How does this happen? Is Deor's successor in his lord's affections someone who came along with a more powerful mode of verse or a better hand on the harp? Is he perhaps just more brilliant and cunning in his praises (punning serially on *cræftig* ["powerful, crafty"] in *leoðcræftig* ["song-powerful, -crafty"]; *Deor* l. 40)?

These open questions, finally unanswerable, do however point to an interesting issue. The court *scop*'s position in Heorot is never said to be insecure; indeed, it seems almost majestical. This, however, is not the case in either *Deor* or *Widsith*, where dependency seems the case as much as not. The social instability sketched by the speaker in those two poems may reflect a psychological instability, in that praise-power and the ability to confer storied honor upon a lord are edgy matters. From the lord's perspective, some measure of one's honor and fame is not in one's hands; rather one looks perhaps uneasily to another, to an inferior in some ways but a superior knower in others. This situation can generate considerable ambivalence on both sides, an ambivalence that might lead to the fate about which Deor complains.[3] Or else that ambivalence might generate enough tension to spring the court poet, as it were, into an itinerant career, into movement from court to court, as seems the case with the Widsith figure. Indeed, in some South African tribes the praise singer can sing only certain kinds of songs—entertainments, usually—in public ceremonials before the king. Other and more intimate, perhaps even touchy, songs are sung *in camera*, as it were, before a select group of family and advisors (Henderson 1990).

We can only with great hazard consider the *Beowulf* poet a court singer like Widsith (Krapp and Dobbie 1966:iii, 149), not knowing whether the poem celebrates any particular lord's illustrious ancestors, mention of the continental Offa notwithstanding. Certainly the poem does not especially praise a given royal house, unless the quasi-Mercian, West Saxon genealogical string that includes Beowulfian names tells us otherwise (as it might: see Earl and Plummer 1965:66). Instead the *Beowulf* poet takes on a cultural role for all Anglo-Saxon and perhaps also Anglo-Danish warriors, lords, and kings who would hear of praise-worthy deeds performed by illustrious ancestors (in the widest, northern sense). This is praise song raised to the level of cultural myth, by means of which the *Beowulf* poet would give word-gold to his Anglo-Saxon present—the gold of an illustrious, noble, pregnant, and conflicted past. What might he receive in turn? Fame, no doubt. *Beowulf* is, although sometimes inscrutable to us, the most meditative and grand of Anglo-Saxon heroic narratives. The poet won something by it simply in and of itself. For us the poem has become an anonymously wrought, sometimes cold but always deeply moving memorial for those who drive their readerly ships across the historical and cultural darkness that surrounds it.

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[3] That is, being replaced by Heorrenda, the land grant he held in exchange for services going then to his laureate successor. However, Opland (1980:217) rightly observes that we do not explictly see that transference taking place. Still, any land right in this situation would not have been a personal matter; rather it would have been something held in trust for as long as services were rendered or required.

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