



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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***Beowulf's* Singers of Tales as Hyperlinks**

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This short essay is written in appreciation of John Miles Foley, who has done more than any other contemporary scholar to probe the analogy between oral tradition and more recent Internet technology. He has explored this correlation both theoretically (most fully in The Pathways Project [2011-] and *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* [2012]) and methodologically (in, for instance, his 2004 electronic edition of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*), and in so doing he has opened up fresh perspectives on oral traditional aesthetics. In light of his contributions, I would like to build on his work in this area to consider an important feature of *Beowulf*, the recurring scenes of poetic performances by a singer (or *scop*), interpreting these moments as non-linear hyperlinks that connect the heroic narrative to a wider network of poetic tradition and thus help the audience navigate the thread of that heroic tale through a web of alternate songs and stories.¹

These performance scenes have not lacked for commentators. Early Oral-Formulaic approaches generally viewed such scenes as straightforward depictions of the process of oral composition (Lord 1960:200; Opland 1980; see also Magoun 1955), whereas more recent work has emphasized that, far from being simple ethnographic descriptions, these scenes of performance are themselves idealized poetic images that form part of the epic fabric of the poem as a whole (Frank 1993; Niles 2003; Amodio 2005). Yet despite their marked poetic stylization, these scenes can still offer valuable clues for how their generative oral tradition was understood to work. By examining the affinities between oral traditional poetry and cloud computing in his The Pathways Project, Foley (2011-) draws out some of the ways such performance scenes in *Beowulf* and other oral-derived poems display an understanding of oral tradition as a dynamic

¹ Discussions of hypertext and interactive digital media as theoretical concepts have now a long history, and the body of relevant scholarship is too vast to summarize conveniently here. A useful introductory collection of essays and excerpts on this and related subjects is *The New Media Reader* (2003), edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, and especially helpful is its included essay by Stuart Moulthrop, "You Say You Want a Revolution? Hypertext and the Laws of Media" (691-704). A more specific application of these concepts within *Beowulf* scholarship is Kevin Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf* (<http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/>), an impressive editorial implementation of some of the ideas discussed here, as it integrates facsimiles of the Nowell Codex, transcriptions, and alternate readings of text through an interactive interface.

network that, much like the Internet, can be navigated by different routes according to the exigencies of the particular performance situation.²

In this brief essay I would like to press Foley's point further by exploring the way in which these scenes of performance not only *depict* the tradition as an active network but are also used to *enact* this network in terms of poetic structure. Much like embedded hyperlinks, these scenes of performance function as portals that lead out from the main narrative, allowing for sudden shifts in time and place, offering alternative narratives and themes, and as a whole helping to situate the story of the hero Beowulf within a wider poetic web of traditional song. While *descriptively* these performance scenes may not portray the actual practice of oral performance in Anglo-Saxon England with ethnographic precision, *structurally* they activate an oral traditional poetics that, even in written form, positions *Beowulf* as an ongoing performance event rather than a finished or fixed text. In short, singers recur throughout *Beowulf* because they are figures around which this traditional interconnectivity is centered; through them the greater traditional network is activated and carried within the epic itself.

Let me briefly summarize these scenes of performance that permeate the poem. In the first half of *Beowulf* they frequently occur at key junctures, intervals of relative calm following or preceding the dramatic action.³ The first of these is the *scop*'s creation song, which, along with the other sounds of revelry at Heorot, first provokes Grendel's ire (86-92). The singer's clear song (*swutol sang scopes* [89b]) and the sound of his harp (*hearpan sweg* [90a]) are crucial components of the traditional "Joy in the Hall" theme (Hume 1974). While there are other elements to this theme (laughter, pouring drink into shiny cups, and the like), when Anglo-Saxon poets wish to invoke metonymically the joy of community, they almost inevitably mention singing and harp-sounding. The song of the *scop* is not merely an element of the poetic image of *dream* (OE: "mirth, joy") but the very culmination of it, the moment where, at the height of communal delight, members of this heroic society achieve a kind of union through collective dreaming. It is this communal meaning of the *scop*'s song, naturally, that Grendel cannot endure.

Grendel manages to silence the singer for some time, and the *scop* resurfaces only upon the arrival of the Geats, as if cued by the promise of restored social order (496-98; 611-12). Following Beowulf's victory we are then given two more performances. In the morning after Grendel's defeat the king's thane recites the praise of Beowulf along with the stories of Sigemund and Heremod (867b-915b), and then again, following the repairs to Heorot, a poet sings a *giedd* recounting the bloody Finnsburh feud (1063-1160), an inset performance nearly 100 lines in length. We would expect another performance to follow Beowulf's second victory; Hrothgar's lengthy "sermon" apparently fulfills this function (1700-84). Upon Beowulf's return to Geatland the poetry shifts focus from communal *dream* to loss. The "Joy in the Hall" images of harp and song are cited only as absences or memories. Instead, individuals perform a series of

² See, for example, "The *Beowulf* Poet's Medieval English Cloud" in the "Cloud and Tradition" node of The Pathways Project (http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Cloud_and_Tradition), in which Foley (2011-) discusses the description in *Beowulf* of one such performance that follows the hero's victory over Grendel (868-70a). Here Foley points out how this description "provides inside testimony on the cloudlike tradition to which any performance of an oral poem connects." In this particular case, the *scop* draws from that cloudlike tradition two contrasting exempla in order to demonstrate to Beowulf two very different potential futures.

³ All following citations of the Old English text of *Beowulf* are taken from Bjork et al. 2008.

laments, as an anonymous and solitary “last survivor” and a heartbroken father both recite elegies (2247-66; 2444-71). The poem then comes to a close with two funeral songs; a Geatish woman utters a litany of impending horrors that will accompany the disintegration of the social fabric (3150-55), and 12 warriors, circling Beowulf’s tomb, solemnly eulogize the fallen king (3169-77).

What does this cursory overview tell us? First, poetic performances are frequently attached to crucial moments in the narrative where they operate as variations on the main action that echo and underscore it and provide alternate and contrasting scenarios. By linking the major events of Beowulf’s heroic career to other narratives or lyrics, they reveal the lateral, traditional significance of these occurrences, rather than their sole significance as determinants for the plot of *Beowulf*.⁴ In this way they give the individual events of Beowulf’s life added depth and resonance. Second, and more generally, this overview highlights the thoroughly structural role of these performances. Rather than adding a patina of oral traditional performance to the poem, these embedded singers and their songs work pervasively to structure the narrative as an oral poetic event by situating the main narrative of *Beowulf* itself within an ongoing stream of hyperlinked performance and traditional narrative. These *scop* scenes, in other words, do not merely depict traditionality; they are used continually to activate it.

The correspondence between hyperlinks and the embedded performance scenes is worth stressing in order to avoid imposing our own text-based assumptions upon the poem, as has happened with some more recent interpretations of these scenes. Roy Liuzza (2005), for example, has argued that these *scop* performances are nostalgic reconstructions of a lost oral past by Anglo-Saxon writers who now find themselves circumscribed by a literate culture. *Beowulf* as a whole, in Liuzza’s elegant formulation, is a “pastoral of pre-textuality” (105) in which the living world of song and poetic fame is set against the poet’s own textual milieu. Yet while *Beowulf*—and a great many of the world’s oral traditions—is clearly invested in images and myths of the past, interpretations such as Liuzza’s tend to understate the possibility that an oral tradition could continue to play an active role in poetry recorded or composed in writing. Such readings effectively flatten the poem, potentially reducing its dynamic poetics to a textual one. *Beowulf*, of course, *is* a text, but the fact remains that it is not especially effective *as* a text. Its early commentators noted and decried its apparent lack of cohesion, although this *liedertheorie* paradigm gave way to J. R. R. Tolkien’s formalist paradigm with its structural metaphor (1991 [1936]),⁵ which in turn was superseded by John Leyerle’s interlace metaphor taken from Anglo-Saxon and Celtic decorative arts (1991 [1967]). Now, with the advent of the Internet, we have a

⁴ In this respect these scenes operate very much within the framework of what Foley labels “traditional referentiality,” a process that “entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text” (Foley 1991:7). What distinguishes the *scop* performance scenes as a special case of this phenomenon, however, is the way in which it is the express function of these scenes to import songs and stories from this wider tradition into the text itself. In other words, whereas traditional referentiality can describe the metonymic character of a wide range of traditional elements (and indeed the traditional idiom itself) that metonymically invoke in the audience traditional associations, the *scop* scenes are actually used to carry that tradition *within* the frame of the narrative in the form of songs and stories.

⁵ As Tolkien explains it, the poem’s structure is “essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings” (32); it is solid, symmetrical, and static—“more like masonry than music” (33).

much more suitable and dynamic analogy. It is this analogy that John Miles Foley has so richly mined over the last decade.

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