

# EMBODYING THE ORAL TRADITION: PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVE POETICS IN AND OF *BEOWULF*\*

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ON THE EVENING of April 19, 1979, a rather improbable play, *The Elephant Man*, opened at the Booth Theatre on Broadway in New York City.<sup>1</sup> Written by Bernard Pomerance, directed by Jack Hofsis, and starring Philip Anglim in a role David Bowie would later take over from September 1980 through early January 1981, *The Elephant Man* dramatizes the life of Joseph Merrick, who lived from 1862 to 1890 and who suffered from a rare disease, most probably Proteus Syndrome, that causes massive, often crippling tissue deformities. The play became something of a hit, was nominated for numerous Tony awards (winning for best play, best actress, and best direction), and had a run of 916 performances. Merrick's life was also the subject of a successful and well-received film by David Lynch that was released in early October of 1980.<sup>2</sup>

It is not the trajectory of Merrick's life, moving as it does from the onset of his debilitating disease in his youth, through his employment as an attraction in sideshows, to his being embraced by high society in the last years of his short life that makes a Broadway play with him as a central character improbable; rather, the play's improbability lies in the decision to bring Merrick's character to life on stage without the use of extensive make-up and prosthetic devices but rather by having the able-bodied actor who played Merrick represent him and his physical disabilities through vocal and gestural means only.<sup>3</sup> Adopting a similar presentational strategy was not an option for the filmmaker Lynch because of his medium's nature and the very different transactional demands it places on the artists who work within it. Even though the dimming of the house lights before the beginning of a play and before the beginning of a movie signal to their respective audiences that they should prepare, in Coleridge's famous phrase, collectively to

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1 <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-elephant-man-3938>, accessed 5 November 2018. The play had two Broadway revivals, one, starring Billy Crudup, ran for 57 performances in 2012 (<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-elephant-man-13289>) and one, starring Bradley Cooper, ran for 83 performances from November 2014 to February 2015 (<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-elephant-man-497261>, accessed 5 November 2018).

2 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080678/>, accessed 5 November 2018.

3 Video and audio clips and photographs of Bowie's performance can be found on YouTube. S. Garner, who comes at the issue from the perspective of Disability Studies aptly notes, "In Search of Merrick," 83, that "the culturally familiar phenomenon of able-bodied performers who enact disability for predominantly able-bodied spectators" has not been given much "attention by critics and scholars."

engage “that willing suspension of disbelief [...] which constitutes poetic faith”<sup>4</sup>—a suspension which, we might add, is the enabling channel for *all* artistic reception—there is a subtle, yet significant difference between the reception dynamics of an artistic event involving live performance and one in which the performance is captured, and necessarily bounded and limited, by audio and/or video media. Although the very medium that preserves it disrupts the producer’s and receiver’s communicative transaction,<sup>5</sup> *mediated* artistic production can be and frequently is quite powerful: one need only think of the last time one was moved by a piece of recorded music, by a film watched in a theatre, at home, or on one’s tablet or smart phone, or by a recording of a poet reading her, his, or their work.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to mediated artistic productions of text, film, and/or sound recording, in *embodied* artistic production the communicative transaction is direct, immediate, intimate, ephemeral, and collective. In the not-too-distant past, and throughout the many centuries in which verbal art was produced before technological developments made possible the recording of sound and moving images, embodied art was not a type of artistic production, it was the only type. Before the development of the technology underlying electronic sound amplification, embodied artistic production was also necessarily intimate since one had to be within earshot of the artist to experience the performance.

The decision to bring Merrick’s character to life on the stage without prosthetic devices or other types of “special effects” highlights in an important way a fundamental aspect of embodied artistic production that is often taken for granted, namely that something unique and special occurs during its production and reception. The phrase “something special,” while admittedly trite, imprecise, and overworked, nonetheless manages to capture the ineffable and deeply intertwined constellation of processes that immediately and necessarily coalesce when performer and audience inhabit the same physically bounded space, be it an intimate venue such the Susan Stein Shiva Theater on the Vassar College campus (capacity about 100) or one as spacious as “The Big House,” as the University of Michigan’s 107,601-seat football stadium is familiarly known. That participants in performances held in small or large spaces nonetheless experience a visceral connectedness to the performance (be it an artistic or athletic one) witnesses the power of the transactional bond that is a fundamental and unique component of embodied artistic production. That this bond persists despite contemporary culture’s ever-increasing heterogeneity and despite its being one in which disembodiment, not embodiment, has become the norm (with an attendant, and unsurprising, preference for disembodied over embodied artistic production<sup>7</sup>), bespeaks just how deeply rooted

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4 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, XIV, 208.

5 Ethnographic fieldworkers have long been aware that their very presence irrevocably changes the dynamics of rituals they are observing or of traditional verbal art they are recording. See Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 103–4.

6 See, for example, Willard, “Questions My Son Asked Me, Answers I Never Gave Him.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVMtru1dOZo>. YouTube video, 2:40, Open Road Media, 6 April 2015.

7 The number of movie tickets sold dwarfs the number of tickets sold to live artistic productions. In 2017, more than 1.2 billion movie tickets were purchased domestically (<https://m.the-numbers>.

within our cultural DNA—and perhaps within our physical DNA—is the “something special” we today experience during embodied artistic productions. We can only surmise how much stronger this bond must have been in more homogeneous cultures in which the primary conduits for the production and reception of art, especially verbal art, are somatic and oral.

Despite its readily acknowledged infelicity, the phrase “embodied artistic production” has the advantage of being capacious enough to allow many types of art to fit under its umbrella, including that to which we now turn, the verbal and entexted art preserved in the vernacular manuscripts extant from Anglo-Saxon England. We will concentrate on both the performative nature of the tradition within which this poetry was produced and disseminated and the different types of embodied performances contained within a particular piece of Anglo-Saxon verbal art: *Beowulf*. These performances fall roughly into two categories: those that are overtly marked as such—among which are the *Beowulf*-poet’s own performance, the one that takes place in Heorot after its creation, and the one that takes place the morning after *Beowulf* dispatches Grendel—and those that are not clearly distinguished as performances but are rather embedded within the narrative and that have to date received little scrutiny. Before considering these performances, however, the cultural matrix within which vernacular verse was produced and disseminated in Anglo-Saxon England needs to be sketched out.

The most important, if slender and problematic, evidence we have regarding this cultural matrix is found in the Venerable Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), a work that dates to the early eighth century and that was translated into Old English at some point in the Anglo-Saxon period, perhaps as part of King Alfred the Great’s (d. 899) programme of having important Latin texts translated into the vernacular. In the twenty-fourth book of this monumental work, Bede recounts the story of Cædmon, a non-literate cowherd who late in life becomes an oral poet, or scop.<sup>8</sup> Generally translated as “poet,” scop derives from the Old English strong verb *scippan* (to shape),<sup>9</sup> and the sense of “shaper” is still very much present in the term’s contemporary usage, where it often refers to figures who engage in praxes that look to be very similar to what oral poets do: namely compose vernacular verse in the moment of performance.<sup>10</sup> Bede’s story of Cædmon is especially important because it is one of the only accounts of scopific activity to have come down to us from Anglo-Saxon England. Even though, as has long been acknowledged, the story of Cædmon cannot be taken as a “case-history” of an Anglo-Saxon oral poet, as Francis Peabody Magoun,

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com/market/, accessed 10 April 2018) while some 240 million were purchased for domestic performing arts events that same year (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/926434/performing-arts-attendance-in-the-us-by-performance-type/>, accessed 10 April 2018).

**8** The Anglo-Saxon scop has long been an elusive figure. See Frank, “Search for the Anglo-Saxon Scop”; Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, 230–36; and, most recently, Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 19–26.

**9** Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v.

**10** But see Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 23–25, who argues that the term’s semantic field encompassed poets who composed in writing as well.

Jr. enthusiastically contended more than sixty years ago,<sup>11</sup> it does have much to tell us about the broader cultural context—however hazy its presentation—within which Bede situates his story of the cowherd who becomes a scop, a context that is, as Bede takes considerable care to detail, highly, and perhaps even exclusively, performative.

While at a “gebeorscipe” (drinking party) one night in which Bede tells us it is expected “*þaet heo ealle scolde þurh endebyrdnesse be hearpan singan*” (that they all must, in the proper sequence, sing to the harp), Cædmon slips away as he eyes “*þa hearpan him nealecan*” (342) (the harp approach him) and returns to the cows he has been charged with watching that night.<sup>12</sup> By leaving the “gebeorscipe,” Cædmon removes himself physically from what John Miles Foley has labelled the “performance arena,”<sup>13</sup> a locus common to many, and perhaps all, oral cultures and one that remains part of our cultural landscape since we, too, enter a performance arena every time we encounter embodied verbal art. While for us the performance arena is solely a physical locus in which we are able to experience the performing arts and one whose unique characteristics we oftentimes overlook, in oral cultures it is a more centralized and more highly specialized locus in which, as Foley explains, “some specialized form of communication is uniquely licensed to take place” during the “enabling event” that is embodied performance.<sup>14</sup> Whether one accepts the inherently non-performative nature of medieval English oral poetics or views it as wholly and inextricably performative despite its surviving only in writing, it is clear that for poor Cædmon, and perhaps even Bede, vernacular poetry can only come into being when it is articulated, quite literally when it is given voice, *embodied*, within the specialized locus of the performance arena during the moment of performance.<sup>15</sup>

Performance has been and continues to be an integral part of traditions that are wholly or partially oral, among which is the South Slavic tradition, for which we have extensive audio and even some photographic evidence that witnesses the tradition’s performative foundations.<sup>16</sup> But since the last of the Anglo-Saxon scopos died well before the advent of sound-recording technology and well before the appearance of the first field-worker, medievalists simply do not have access to the resources that those who work on other, more contemporary oral traditions have, including audio and/or video recordings, interviews (on tape or from written notes) with those who produce traditional verbal art, still or video photography of traditional artists in performance, etc.

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11 See Magoun, “Bede’s Story of Cædmon.”

12 I cite Bede from T. Miller, *Old English Version*; unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

13 Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 8.

14 Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 8.

15 While the nature of the performance arena varies from culture (and tradition) to culture (and tradition), in Anglo-Saxon England, the specialized form of communication that it enables is the expressive economy of traditional oral poetics, a dedicated register grounded in specialized lexical, metrical, and narrative collocations and patterns. It is, further, the register through which all poetry in the period was articulated. See further, Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 33–78.

16 These materials are housed at Harvard University and are available on the website of The Milman Parry Collection: <https://chs.harvard.edu/mpc>.

Rather, we must instead rely solely on the manuscripts that have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period. Because the evidence contained in those manuscripts is entexted, it is necessarily silent and static in ways that traditional oral verbal art never is, or could be. Given the nature of the available evidence, it is fair to ask what light these fixed, silent witness to a once vital—and oral—tradition can shed on the performative nature of Anglo-Saxon oral poetics and the Anglo-Saxon performance arena. The answer, not surprisingly, is “not much” because in the mediated state that they have come down to us, they have necessarily been stripped of all the meta-textual features that are critical components of embodied verbal art.<sup>17</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that the evidence offered by Anglo-Saxon oral poetics opens an important and significant window onto the oral tradition of which it is such an integral part,<sup>18</sup> but our understanding of that tradition can at best be partial for so long as oral poetics remains solely entexted, and not also embodied, it can afford only a limited understanding of the larger tradition of which it is part, no matter how broad and deep we believe our understanding of its entexted poetics might be. Although, as noted above, there is no way directly to explore the somatics of Anglo-Saxon oral poetics, we are able to do so indirectly by examining performance both *within* and *of* the extant poetry. Both types of evidence must be handled with care, especially the latter, and we must accept that the interpretive yield such evidence offers may ultimately prove modest, but both types of evidence are valuable since they offer us what words on the manuscript page cannot: bodies that inhabit fictional and real-world spaces.

We begin by considering narrative moments in which literate poets depict their fictional counterparts at work. Distant though they might be from whatever the enacted reality of performance in Anglo-Saxon England was, these fictionalized scopos nonetheless occupy a position immeasurably closer to it than we can get via the pathways contemporary oral theory provides. Such narrative moments are relatively rare in the corpus of Old English poetry, with the majority of them concentrated, for reasons we cannot consider here, in *Beowulf*. Not only are these moments rare, but they are frequently not quite so clear-cut as we would expect—or might wish—they to be.

The scopic activity in *Beowulf* falls into several categories. In the first of these, the scop is explicitly mentioned but his performance is reported second-hand as happens, for example, during the initial celebration following Grendel's death, when we are sim-

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**17** Some scholars have attempted to rectify the flatness that necessarily attends textually encoded works of embodied traditional art through the very medium of print and have, in the words of Fine, *Folklore Text*, 1, sought to “translate [...] performance [...] to print.” Performances can be atomized easily enough, and the performers’ gestures, tone, inflection, posture, volume, as well as all the other constituent elements of their performances can be richly detailed in print, but since written language is a necessarily linear, time-bounded mode of communication, it is not particularly well suited to, and perhaps simply cannot, adequately represent any real-world physical action, let alone one with as many complexly interwoven strands as the performance of traditional oral verbal art. Given the decidedly mixed nature of Fine’s—and others’—results, it may well be that nothing short of a somatic re-enactment or a video recording (both of which have certain inescapable drawbacks) can ever approximate, however inadequately, the dynamics of a lived event.

**18** See Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 1–78.

ply told that “Hwilum” (867b) (at times), a scop “sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian / on sped wrecan spel gerade” (872–73) (the venture of Beowulf wisely told and he skilfully recited an apt tale).<sup>19</sup> There is no direct representation, or for that matter, even a detailed account of what the scop sang at this celebration, just the report that it incorporated Beowulf’s deed of the preceding night and that it also contained all that the scop knew about Sigemund, to whose heroic exploits Beowulf’s are favourably compared. Seamus Heaney is one of the only ones who sees in this section—and here “see” is an important term—evidence of something more than periphrasis, and so he does what he does throughout his translation when he wishes to represent the voice of a scop in the poem: he italicizes lines 884b–915 and so visually marks this section as an instance of scopic activity.<sup>20</sup> Because the poem does not physically distinguish these lines in any way from the those that surround them, many students of the poem understandably read them as simply being the *Beowulf*-poet’s report of the song’s substance and not a performance of the song itself.

The next category of entexted scopic activity is the even rarer one in which the scop’s song *is* reported by the poet, as it is in the so-called Finn episode, which details a visit that starts out amicably but which is twice marred by much bloodshed and death. Once again, a scop is part of the narrative present, and in this instance the *Beowulf*-poet situates the scop’s performance within one of the most fully marked performative social contexts in the extant vernacular poetry:

þær wæs sang and sweg samod ætgædere  
fore Healfdenes hildewisan,  
gomenwudu greted, gid oft wrecen,  
ðonne [h]ealgamen, Hroþgares scop  
æfter medobence mænan sceolde [...].  
(1063–68a)<sup>21</sup>

(There was song and noise mingled together before Half-Dane’s battle leaders, the lyre touched, a song often recited, when during the hall entertainment Hrothgar’s scop should perform among the mead benches [...].)

The completion of this lengthy episode—it runs to nearly 100 lines—is clearly marked for us with the phrase “Leoð wæs asungen” (1159b) (the song was sung) and that this is the only time in the poem that the word “leoð” appears as a simplex marks the preceding section as special discourse,<sup>22</sup> as something other than the periphrasis the *Beowulf*-poet elsewhere—and more routinely—offers in connection with scopic activity. But while the conclusion of the Finn episode reveals it to be the performance of a scop, the beginning of it curiously does not. In fact, the beginning of the “leoð” of Finn is so completely

<sup>19</sup> I cite *Beowulf* from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*.

<sup>20</sup> See Heaney, *Beowulf*. Whether he is correct in so doing is an issue that lies outside the bounds of the present discussion.

<sup>21</sup> In this instance I do not follow Fulk, Bjork, and Niles in taking the compound “healgamen” as the name of Hrothgar’s scop. See further their note to lines 1066–70.

<sup>22</sup> The other four times it occurs, at 786a (“gryreleoð”), 1424a (in the conjectural “[fyrd]leoð”), 1522a (“guðleoð”), and 2460b (“sorhleoð”), it does so only as the second element of compounds.

unmarked that editors still do not fully agree on where it commences. Additionally, translating “mænan” as “perform,” despite being in line with the practice of many translators, remains rather problematic because as the editors of *Klaeber’s Beowulf* point out, “mænan is nowhere else attested in the sense ‘recite, perform,’ only ‘tell of.’”<sup>23</sup> Finally, and most complicatedly, in the Finn episode the *Beowulf*-poet may himself adopt the voice of a scop, or even step into the persona of a fictional scop within the confines of the meta-narrative he is articulating.

In addition to those narrative moments in which a scop figures either directly or indirectly or which otherwise invoke the performance arena—as, for example, at the poem’s conclusion when both a nameless Geatish woman and twelve riders enter performance arenas, the former when she keens at Beowulf’s pyre and the latter when they ride around his tomb reciting “wordgyd” (an elegiac song or songs)—there are others that shed light both on the performative nature of Anglo-Saxon oral poetics and on the nature of embodied performance in the period. Among these are the coast-guard’s speech to the Geatish troop that has just landed in Denmark unannounced and uninvited (236–57); Beowulf’s response to Unferth’s accusation that he behaved foolishly and irresponsibly by entering into a swimming match (or some sort of aquatic contest) with Breca (530–606); and Hrothgar’s so-called sermon (1700–84), which he delivers during the feast celebrating Beowulf’s victory over Grendel’s mother. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative, for there are certainly other, perhaps many, moments in the poem that would fit comfortably within the scope of this discussion.<sup>24</sup>

Of these speeches, the first three are delivered at particularly freighted narrative moments. The episodes in which the first two occur have the potential to end in violence and in the third one, the aged king Hrothgar urges the still young, powerful warrior Beowulf not to trust overly much in his youthful strength since it will soon be diminished by, in Hrothgar’s words, “atol ylðo” (1766a) (horrible old age). All three speeches contain performative markers and a powerfully metonymic lexeme that help distinguish them as being other-than-normal discourse, and in two of them the speaker employs objects that function as dramatic props:<sup>25</sup> the coast-guard rides up to the recently disembarked Geats and shakes his spear—perhaps ritually, perhaps just threateningly, but most certainly performatively—before he launches into his speech, one that is further marked off from quotidian discourse by the use of the compound “mæpelwordum” (236b) (formal words), a term that is itself additionally marked as other-than-normal by virtue of its being a hapax legomenon.<sup>26</sup> Hrothgar uses an interjection to mark the commencement of his so-called sermon, “Pæt, la, mæg secgan” (1700a) (that, lo, one

**23** Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 180.

**24** These include, among others, Wealhtheow’s speech in Heorot prior to Beowulf’s fight with Grendel and the “beot” (formal vow) Beowulf utters on several occasions.

**25** On the central role metonymy plays in the expressive economies of oral traditions, see Foley, *Immanent Art*, especially 7–8.

**26** The closely related “mæpelcwide” (discourse; converse) is found elsewhere in the poetry, three times in *Guthlac* (1007a; 1015b; and 1219a) and once in the metrical *Saturn and Solomon* (434a). See Bjork, “Speech as Gift.”

may say), and he gives the speech after looking upon, and perhaps even holding, the hilt of the “eald sweord eotenisc” (1558a) (old sword made by giants) which Beowulf used to kill Grendel’s mother and defile Grendel’s corpse.<sup>27</sup> And finally, Beowulf marks the beginning of his reply to Unferth by using a common and important performative marker, the same interjection, “hwæt,” with which the poem opens and which has been demonstrated by Ward Parks to be an integral part of the metonymic, highly associative way of speaking that is traditional Anglo-Saxon oral poetics.<sup>28</sup>

The poem offers little evidence about the nature and dynamics of these embedded performances and, as we might expect, it does not offer much regarding the way in which the moments of scop activity it presents are received. What it does offer reveals, not surprisingly, that scopcs encountered a range of audiences: some may have been quiet, as seems to have been the case with those who heard the Finn episode related in *Heorot* (following the episode’s completion we are told that “Gamen *eft* astah, / beorhtode bencsweg” [1160b–61a; emphasis mine] [joy *again* arose, the bench-noise sounded clearly]), while others were anything but, as apparently is the case at the outdoor celebration following Beowulf’s dispatching of Grendel.<sup>29</sup> Of the three speeches with which we are currently concerned, one of them—Hrothgar’s—is received by a silent, attentive audience (the *Beowulf*-poet is careful to point out that when the king begins to speak, “swigedon ealle” [1699b] [all fell silent]) and it does not seem too much of a stretch

**27** Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 158–94 and, most recently, Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read*, 22–23, accept that Hrothgar reads with comprehension the “runstafas” (1695a) (runic letters) inscribed on this hilt, but the matter remains less settled than they contend.

**28** See Parks, “Traditional Narrator.”

**29** In other instances, in contrast, scopcs, including the one who performs at the celebration following the defeat of Grendel, may well have had to compete for the attention of their audiences against other events and they may have had to step into the performance arena at irregular or undetermined intervals, whenever, that is, an opportunity arose to seize, however momentarily, the group’s attention. Because we know so little about actual performances in Anglo-Saxon England, any discussion of performance as an actual, lived event and certainly any attempt at representing one of them must fall firmly within the realm of speculation, but with this caveat in mind, let us consider briefly one recent attempt at depicting an Anglo-Saxon scop performing, one that, perhaps surprisingly, gets much right about the performance arena, even though it derives from a rather unlikely source, Robert Zemeckis’s 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf*. The film does get a great deal wrong—for example, the scop speaks rhyming, quantitative verse, not the alliterative, qualitative verse that all Anglo-Saxon poets employed—but if we are able to overlook its many errors (some of which are howlers), the film offers an intriguing glimpse of what an Anglo-Saxon performance arena *might* have been like. Although it was a locus that licensed a richly associative way of speaking, the physical space of the performance arena was not necessarily so sharply or strictly defined as it has become for us. In the film’s first scene, Zemeckis’s scop is neither set apart from the audience in any fashion nor is he the focus of the audience’s attention. The scop, rather, struggles to make himself heard above the din in the hall and performs standing on one of the hall’s tables, perhaps in an effort to attract the attention of the others at the feast, apparently to little effect. In the context of the poem, one can imagine the scop who performs the morning after Beowulf tears off Grendel’s arm and shoulder behaving similarly: the focus of the celebration is not the scop’s performance, but the horse racing and any other activities that might be going on, and the scop must either compete for the attention of those present during the racing or wait until there is a lull in the action before stepping forward to begin, or resume, his activity. See Amodio, “Res(is)ting the Singer,” 198–99.

to imagine that the other two speeches are similarly received by “audiences” that are equally silent and attentive given the tense, rather fraught contexts in which they take place and given how much is riding on each of them.

Of the two different models of embedded performances discussed above, the first, involving as it does a character who overtly engages the traditional expressive economy of oral poetics within that tradition’s performance arena, is familiar. The individuals who do so are frequently, but not always (as in the case of *Cædmon*) identified as scop and they “wreca” (speak, relate) “gid” (songs, tales) that grow out of secular and Christian subject matter. But the poem also contains instances in which characters not identified as scop step forth and engage in performances (that are similarly not identified as “gid”) at a number of (mostly) important narrative moments. The distinction between these two types of performative moments is, on the one hand, quite clear: scop engage in a specialized, culturally sanctioned type of activity, one that is further clearly indicated as such while the performances (if we can label them such) of the coast guard, *Beowulf*, and *Hrothgar* are not. On the other hand, the distinction is not so clear because the specialized register and the equally specialized channels of meaning that the scop utilize within the performance arena are also employed by the coast guard, *Beowulf*, and *Hrothgar* since the entire poem is composed within the stable, deterministic, homeostatic tradition within which Old English poetry was articulated. The uniformity of the vernacular poetic register is one reason why Heaney, as noted above, sets in italics what he hears as the voice of a fictionalized scop: he must mark it visually because the fictional scop’s language is in not in any way distinguished from the rest of the narrative on the flat, static, silent, and disembodied surface of the manuscript page.<sup>30</sup>

As even the brief comments offered above reveal, there is much to be gained from an analysis of these entexted performances, but, as we will see below, when they become embodied, something rather simple—but nonetheless startling and significant—happens once the performer reinvests them with the affective performative strategies, including voice, intonation, stress, gestures, and facial expressiveness, that the entexted, mediated performances lack. To illustrate, and perhaps clarify, this point, we turn now from bodies and performances that exist only on the page to actual ones. Doing so requires that we leave the world of early medieval England and turn to the present day, and it requires as well a caveat: given that the actual nature of performance in Anglo-Saxon England has so far remained shrouded in the mists of history, and given that it is likely to remain hidden from us, the question of any contemporary performance’s authenticity is moot.<sup>31</sup> Since they are situated far from the specialized performance arena that existed during the Anglo-Saxon period, all contemporary performances of the extant texts are equally inauthentic, although in admittedly different ways. This does not, however, mean that contemporary performances cannot reveal something of value because, as Lauri Honko reminds us, even within traditional cultures, “[a]ny perfor-

**30** That there are no lexical or metrical differences distinguishing the Finn episode’s register and that of the larger narrative in which it is embedded is one of the reasons it is so difficult to determine with absolute precision the episode’s starting point.

**31** See Amodio and Babgy, “Performing Anglo-Saxon Elegies,” this volume.

mance is a compromise, an [...] adaptation.”<sup>32</sup> With this in mind, let us briefly explore some of what happens when *Beowulf* becomes embodied.

The first contemporary performance we will consider is an audio recording of portions of the poem made in late 1997—just a few months before his death in early 1998—by Edward B. Irving, Jr, one of the most distinguished Anglo-Saxonists of his generation. The other is a video recording made on the campus of Vassar College in March 2018 of Benjamin Bagby, a renowned performer and early musicologist, performing the poem’s first 1062 lines. Both Irving’s and Bagby’s performances have great merit, but as they approach the poem from sharply different perspectives and employ very different performance strategies, they accordingly produce very different versions of *Beowulf*. Irving’s is one of the best representatives of the way the poem is perhaps most frequently performed: a single reader produces a text-centred voicing of the poem, one dominated by the steadiness of the poem’s metrics and the regularity and precision of the reader’s enunciation, as can be heard in Irving’s performance of the poem’s first fifty-two lines. This recording, labelled item 1, can be found in the folder Amodio at the url cited in n. 33.<sup>33</sup>

As is true for any number of text-centred performances,<sup>34</sup> Irving’s is a lovely rendition of the words on the page, but text-centred performances have a certain, perhaps inescapable, flatness to them. While they give voice to the surface of the text, they do not breathe much life into it because they fail to unlock the extra-textual, embodied tradition that lies beyond the static surface of the manuscript page and that necessarily gets elided when embodied oral traditional verbal art becomes entexted or, to a lesser extent, when it is simply voiced. This is especially true of more extreme versions of text-centred performances, including one by Robert P. Creed that grew out of his work on Beowulfian prosody in *Reconstructing the Rhythm of Beowulf*. When performing the poem, Creed would recite, almost chant, the poem with virtually no variation in tone. Further, the so-called caesuras in the middle of each line and the end of each line were punctuated by Creed sounding a single, unvarying note with his hand, a practice that imbued his performance with a droning regularity.<sup>35</sup>

While it may not seem to be, especially for those experiencing it for the first time, Bagby’s performance of the same lines Irving performed is as faithful to the language encoded on the pages of London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv as Irving’s. This recording, labelled item 2, can be found in the folder Amodio at the url cited in

<sup>32</sup> Honko, *Textualization of Oral Epics*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Irving, *Favorite Passages from Beowulf*. Used with the kind permission of Paul R. Thomas and the Chaucer Studio. [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B\\_DdIKm\\_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U).

<sup>34</sup> A great many recordings, some made by specialists and many more by non-specialists, can be found on YouTube. The performances of the latter must, of course, be approached with due caution. For an excellent reading of the entire poem, see the recording Malone made for the aptly named Caedmon Records in 1967.

<sup>35</sup> Creed’s approach, private correspondence, was modelled in part on that of the Serbo-Croatian guslari recorded by Parry and Lord on the field trips to then-Yugoslavia in the 1930s. Their recordings are housed in the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard University. See n. 16 above.

n. 36.<sup>36</sup> But despite working from the same “libretto,” to again borrow a term from Foley,<sup>37</sup> even the short passages under consideration here reveal, unsurprisingly, how different are Bagby’s and Irving’s performances: Irving came to the poem from an academic background, and throughout his performance he remains wholly faithful to that background. One can very profitably illustrate Eduard Sievers’s metrical taxonomy for Old English using Irving’s recording, which remains a valuable resource for teaching Old English pronunciation.<sup>38</sup> Bagby, in contrast, comes to the poem as a conservatory trained musician, as someone well versed in contemporary oral theory, and as a highly regarded theorist and professional performer of early music. What distinguishes Bagby’s performance from text-centred, academic ones such as Irving’s is the degree to which he does not simply give voice to the language on the page but rather fully embodies its oral poetics and resituates that poetics within the performative context in which it initially developed and in which for so long it could only be articulated and received. The traditional expressive economy of oral poetics is much more than the sum of its repeated metrical, lexical, and narrative collocations, that is, of the entexted, non-performative, and by now quite familiar features through which we are able to know it; it also encompasses the entirety of the far less familiar—because still largely ignored—range of linguistic and paralinguistic features that are essential communicative components of all expressive economies. Bagby’s rendition of lines 126–34a is but one of many moments that well illustrate the range and power of his performative strategy and of the performative features (and possibilities) latent within entexted oral poetics. This recording, labelled item 3, can be found in the folder Amodio at the url cited in n. 39.<sup>39</sup>

What Bagby does so clearly in contrast to text-centred performances is tap productively into a foundational component of the text’s and the tradition’s oral poetics—its affective dynamics—in the way that few other performers do, and that text-centred performers may simply be unable to do.<sup>40</sup> As a case in point, I turn to one final portion of Bagby’s performance, the poet’s introduction to the speech in which Unferth, Hrothgar’s “*þyle*,”<sup>41</sup> questions—or verbally attacks—Beowulf following the Geatish warrior’s arrival at Heorot and the speech itself (499–528). This recording, labelled item 4, can be

**36** [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B\\_DdIKm\\_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U). Items 2, 3, and 4 in this folder are from a performance Bagby gave at Vassar College, March 8, 2018. I am very grateful to Brandon Deichler, media specialist in the office of Computing and Information Services, for all his help in recording this performance and preparing these video files and Irving’s audio file for inclusion here.

**37** Foley, “From Oral Performance,” 233.

**38** See Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*.

**39** [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B\\_DdIKm\\_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U). As Irving did not record these lines, we cannot, unfortunately, compare his treatment of them to Bagby’s, but a good comparand can be found in Malone, *Beowulf*, disc 1, 9:22 to 9:44.

**40** On traditional oral affective dynamics, see Renouir, *Key to Old Poems*, 1–46.

**41** As the editors of *Klaeber’s Beowulf* judiciously note, “[w]hat the title *þyle* applied to *Unferð* (1165, 1456) means cannot be determined with certainty” (150). In their glossary, s.v., they offer “*orator, spokesman, official entertainer*” (emphasis theirs).

found in the folder Amodio at the url cited in n. 42.<sup>42</sup> Whatever one's response to Bagby's rendition of this narratively fraught moment in the poem might be,<sup>43</sup> Unferth's being embodied in the manner that Bagby does opens up an intriguing window onto not just Unferth's character, and the cultural, social, and poetic matrix which he inhabits, but also onto the affective dynamics inherent in Anglo-Saxon oral poetics. One need not agree with every (or any) decision Bagby makes in bringing Unferth to life, and in this light it is important to note that Bagby himself remains acutely aware that what he is offering is not *the* way an Anglo-Saxon scop would have performed Unferth, but rather *a* way to perform him. We will never know if any scops slurred their words, as Bagby habitually does, when performing this speech, but while knowing if they did would further both our understanding of the traditional performance arena they inhabited and shed light on the poem's reception aesthetics, even if we had evidence of their performative practices, these practices would in a fundamental regard be equivalent to Bagby's in that both rest upon choices that the performer makes when embodying not just the text, but the characters that populate it. A great many of these choices are, further, not prescribed but are rather made in the lived moment of performance.

In Bagby's performances of the passages containing the embedded performances briefly considered above, he employs three decidedly different voices, the exact nature of which changes from performance to performance. On certain nights the coast guard is full of bluster, on others he's more subdued; Beowulf is sometimes more, sometimes less tolerant of Unferth, who is more intoxicated on some nights than others (interestingly, when he's really loaded, Unferth frequently gets a bigger laugh from the audience than when he is only moderately in his cups); and finally, although Hrothgar's sermon is not a part of the poem Bagby has yet performed, in those of Hrothgar's speeches Bagby does perform, the king sometimes sounds quite frail and almost overcome by a bone-deep weariness, and sometimes he sounds more accepting and reflective. There is nothing unusual about these sorts of variations as they are fundamental and expected components of all live performances; but while we fully expect that no two actors will inhabit the role of Shakespeare's Iago the same way and while we are not in the least surprised that the character's portrayal by any actor varies, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly from performance to performance, the characters in *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poems tend to be seen as two-dimensional, fixed representations. While not all will agree with the interpretive decisions Bagby makes in embodying the poem's characters, and while there are certainly good reasons to fault many of the oftentimes rather unfortunate choices Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary make in the screenplay for the Zemeckis film, we need to bear in mind that there is always something to be gained when characters on the page are brought to life, especially when they are brought to life within the

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42 [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B\\_DdIKm\\_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U). Clover's "Germanic Context" remains an indispensable guide to this scene and its broader narrative and traditional contexts.

43 From having discussed this scene on numerous occasions both with scholarly audiences as well as with the students in my annual *Beowulf* seminar, I can attest that it elicits a wide range of oftentimes sharply divided opinions.

context of a live performance because the dynamics of the performance arena and the unique and powerful affective channels essential to it have remained relatively constant for over a thousand years. The specifics of these channels and of the specialized pathways through which they are transmitted and received have changed significantly, but the fundamental nature of the special transaction that takes place within any performance arena between performer and audience has not.

As Foley reminds us, “[a]t its very best a textual reproduction [of traditional verbal art]—with the palpable reality of the performance flattened onto a page and reduced to an artifact—[...] is a script for reperformance, a libretto to be enacted and re-enacted, a prompt for an emergent reality.”<sup>44</sup> Foley is correct in this assessment, but in addition to being a “prompt for an emergent reality,” a text composed within the ambit of traditional oral poetics is also a prompt for an embodied reality. For many years, performers of *Beowulf*, many of whom are first and foremost scholars, have sought to align the poem with what we know, or think we know, of its language and metrics, something which has put them in the middle of a hermeneutic circle because what we know of the language and metrics of the poem comes not from either lived experience or from the Anglo-Saxons themselves, but rather from the efforts of scholars, the first of whom took up the matter beginning in the late nineteenth century. As a result, many performers of *Beowulf* create the poem they have come to expect to hear. In contrast, Bagby does not approach the poem from an exterior, textualist perspective but rather from the inside, from its performative, affective foundations in a tradition that was once necessarily voiced *and* necessarily embodied. While the unique text of *Beowulf* found in Cotton Vitellius A.xv is the product of a literate author or scribe, the story of Beowulf the manuscript preserves is rooted in an oral tradition that was, at some point in its history, solely performative. What Bagby does when he performs the poem using the wide range of visual and aural affective strategies he employs may not resonate with every student of the poem and may well strike some as heretical, but there’s a vitality to his presentation that few, if any, others match. Bagby’s approach, which is expressive, affective, dynamic—in short *embodied*—reminds us, in a way and to a degree that other approaches cannot, that the mute, static artefact we know as *Beowulf* is the product of what at one time was very much a vibrant tradition expressed through a living language dynamically received by a living audience.

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<sup>44</sup> Foley, “From Oral Performance,” 233.

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