Dancing with the Dragon:
Orality and (body) language(s) in a live performance of *Beowulf*

JEFF KAPLAN

ABSTRACT

This paper theorizes on the function of language and embodiment in northern European storytelling through a self-reflex analysis of the author's experience performing *Beowulf* in its original dialect, as a solo, while dancing. *Beowulf is Min Nama* involved memorizing approximately 80 minutes of the medieval *Beowulf* epic in its original West Anglo-Saxon dialect (lines 2200—2766, Beowulf's encounter with the dragon). Grappling with bardic verse for recitation in experimental live performance uncovered new facets in ancient performance texts. Working with the *Beowulf* poem for stage revealed the mnemonic quality of alliteration, the pervasive use of rhythmic patterns to signal shifts in ideas (a strategy similar to West African dance), and perhaps "deep rhythms" present in medieval northern Europe. As impetus for choreography, the verse contains rhythmic information, corresponding to musical/dance concepts such as pick-ups, counterpoint, and syncopation. *Beowulf is Min Nama* also required a theory of dialect for Old English, which the author based on modern Swedish, medieval Frisian, and modern Frisian — especially the voices of Frisian poets Tsjêbbe Hettinga and Albertina Soepboer. The project thus provides an entrée into the nexus between ancient and modern storytelling, and concludes that contemporary Frisian poetry represents a direct inheritor to ancient solo performance forms.

Dancing with the Dragon:
Orality and (body) language(s) in a live performance of *Beowulf*

This paper theorizes on the function of language in ancient English and Scandinavian storytelling traditions through a self-reflexive analysis of *Beowulf is min nama...* ("Beowulf is my name…"), a devised solo piece in which I narrated eighty minutes of the *Beowulf* epic in its original West Anglo-Saxon dialect (lines 2200a—2766b), Beowulf's encounter with the dragon), while dancing. The project involved learning Anglo-Saxon, mastering Old English poetics, and preparing a translation of the source text into modern English for projection over the stage space. The multivariate and multisensory presence of "languages" afforded complex performance strategies. For example, the simultaneity of movement and spoken modes allowed gesture to reveal, comment upon, or at times contradict the oral text, and vice versa. Telling a story in Old English about a Swedish king to a contemporary American audience created additional layering.

The experience of grappling with Anglo-Saxon provides an opportunity to reach into the distant performance past in order to speculate on bardic practice in medieval England and Scandinavia. What are epics such as *Beowulf* like to actually perform and what do they mean in the present? As a methodology, this paper articulates rehearsal and performance discoveries in working with Anglo-Saxon epic poetry as examples of what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's terms "repertoire," which Taylor defines as embodied knowledge: dance, gesture, and non-permanent actions that transmit "choreographies of meaning."[1] Distinct from archival knowledge, which focuses on textual modes, "repertoire" encompasses knowledge based on doing. Enacting *Beowulf* was like scaling a mountain, in that the text contained fissures and handholds that become palpable upon scaling, and which traditional analytic critiques necessarily overlook. The two-year dramaturgical and rehearsal "climb" yielded unexpected insights: alliteration and rhythm facilitate memo-

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1.   Taylor 2003, 20.

rization; rhythmic patterns signal shifts in ideas (suggesting parallels to contemporary West African dance forms); "deep rhythms" embedded in poetry can translate into dance and acting choices, and also mirror musical concepts, such as pick-ups, counterpoint, and syncopation.

Rehearsal-hall exploration led to creative discoveries, but how far can experimentation illuminate an ancient repertoire, in Taylor's sense? By way of analogy, paleoanthropologists and archaeologists knap stone tools, polish bronze axe heads, and chip obsidian flakes in order to understand technologies of the remote past. These findings may or may not correspond to the ways in which ancient humans used similar materials. However, so-called "experimental archaeology" permits educated guesses into marks on rock, leather, and bone. The goals of experimental archaeology, according to a foundational text by archaeologist John Coles, "are not for total retrieval of information; instead they are for a greater understanding of data already available, and for an insight into other behavior the traces of which may be too faint to decipher."[2] Experimental archaeology seeks to uncover past human behavior through the recreation of material artifacts, but the same principle of reconstructive inquiry can also apply to what we might call "performance archaeology." The techniques I uncovered to chip, polish, and cut my performance inform traditional scholarship regarding bardic practice across medieval England and Scandinavia.

Anthropological analogues can further calibrate performance as a research tool. Anthropologist Dennis Tedlock coined the term "ethnopaleography" to refer to his strategy of using native Quiché speakers as informants in his study of the *Popol Vuh*, a collection of sacred Mayan texts.[3] By interviewing the Mayans' descendants, Tedlock felt he could extrapolate cultural, linguistic, and prosodic context — a strategy medievalists have broached as well.[4] Likewise, in tackling the problem of a stage dialect for West Anglo-Saxon, the literary language of medieval England, I immersed myself in the sounds and rhythms of modern Frisian, a language family in the northern and western coasts of the Netherlands, and English's closest living relative. Recordings by contemporary Frisian poets Tsjêbbe Hettinga and Albertina Soepboer served as vocal models and inspirations. Through an active exploration of an ancient text, and comparing my approach to those of Frisian poets, I feel that I have been able to uncover aspects of English and Scandinavian performance in

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2. Coles 1970, 210.
3. Tedlock 1983.
4. See Harris 2003, 97—117.

the interrupted cloth of the repertoire. Furthermore, based on my performance of *Beowulf*, I have come to consider contemporary Frisian poets as direct inheritors of ancient bardic practices.

DANCING WITH THE DRAGON

Beowulf is a 3000-line poem by an unknown author working sometime before the Norman invasion of England in 1066. The poem is unusual in that it survives in written form at all. Someone (perhaps a Christian monk), either transcribed *Beowulf* from a live performance, or composed the epic in imitation of the oral tradition dominant in England and across Northern Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire. *Scop* refers to a practitioner of the bardic tradition in England, from the verb *schieppen*, "to make." That is to say, *scops* fashioned poems by "linking" half lines of verse together across a caesura, like joining metal rings on a warshirt.[5] *Skald* corresponds to *scop* in Old Norse, and, according to one theory, derives from a hypothesized Germanic verb **skeldan*, "to abuse verbally."[6] Perhaps the nomenclature refers to formal boasts, a specialty of ancient oral poets. Old Norse texts liken *skalds* to artisans who inlay wire around decorative objects, or to stonemasons or builders.[7] In contrast to skaldic verse, Old Norse *eddic* poetry was non-alliterative and concerned with heroes, epics, aphorism, and stories of the mythic or semi-mythic past.[8]

By convention, the songs of *scops* and *skalds* fall under the "oral-formulaic" rubric, created by classicist Milman Parry and Parry's student, Albert Bates Lord.[9] Parry and Lord argued that the demands of oral poetry necessitated strategic use of formulae. As Parry explains, a poetic formula is "an expression that is regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express a particular essential idea."[10] For instance, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Athena is always "gray-eyed," because (in Greek) the epithet fills out the dactylic hexameter after Athena's name. Artistry comes in the assembly of original and formulaic phrases into "themes," or components of stories already familiar to audiences. Medievalist Francis C. Magoun applied the oral-formulaic model to Anglo-Saxon scholarship across a series of articles in the 1950s and

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5.   The nature and role of *scops* engenders controversy. For a start to the debate, see Opland 1980, 190—229.
6.   Gade 1995, 1.
7.   Ross 2005, 84—96.
8.   Gade 1995, 1.
9.   Parry 1928; Lord 1960.
10.   Parry 1928, 16.

60s, and the Parry/Lord paradigm has been a fixture of Old English and medieval Scandinavian studies since.[11]

The oral-formulaic model has not enjoyed freedom from criticism. Philologist Roberta Frank highlights the scarcity of evidence on which romanticized notions of oral-epic poets in England emerge.[12] Old English literary scholar John D. Niles argues that assumptions regarding pre-Norman oral performance reflect medieval retrospection, "the source of layers upon layers of nostalgia that have been a potent aspect of the Western sensibility up to the present day."[13] Niles contends that the ways in which Anglo-Saxons thought about poetry may hold value as a history of mentalities, but do not count as evidence for bardic technique. Similarly, from a corpus-based analysis of Anglo-Saxon terms for "poet," English scholar Emily Thornbury concludes that "*scop*" meant something like "statesman." Thornbury notes that psalmists were the most likely group to self-identify as *scops* and that no evidence exists for a professional poet class. In fact, Thornbury observes that writers rarely self-identified poets "at all."[14] Rather, poetry served mundane ends: "it taught facts, recorded names, or filled a given space in the liturgy," she writes.[15] Thornbury's findings buttress South African literary and performance scholar Jeff Opland's suggestion that poetry and music were related, though distinct fields. In this view, the bard as *gleowman* ("songman") in the sense of a traveling player, produced a *leoð* ("lay" — that is, a popular song), and differed from the bard who fashions chronicles or eulogies for a court.[16]

The debate over bardic practice, and even the existence of ancient bards, remains contentious — pitting a conception of storytellers as primordial scholars versus non-literate musicians. In Scandinavia, skaldic poets performed tales of heroes for Scandinavian and Icelandic courts using *dróttkvætt* ("court meter"), itself influenced by pagan and Latin sources, whereas eddic poets used *fornyrðislag* (literally, "past words law," a prosodic system similar to *Beowulf*'s). On the other hand, skaldic bards also used *fornyrðislag* meter, and both skaldic and eddic poets used additional rhythmic structures, further calling definitions into question.[17] Even if skalds wrote verse, we should not

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11. For a comprehensive historiography with lucid examples, including Athena's, see Watts 1969, 7—62.
12. Frank 1993, 11.
13. Niles 2003, 42.
14. Thornbury 2014, 34.
15. Thornbury 2014, 37.
16. Opland 1980, 257—66.
17. Ross 2005, 21—28.

assume that they did not also extemporize, or that "oral" parts of society were unable to produce written poetry.

At times, scriptocentric critiques risk circularity when they use written sources to support a book-centric past. As performance studies progenitor Dwight Conquergood chastised, "Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to their everyday lives and occupational security."[18] In the opposite direction, I bring a dancer's bias. As a practitioner, I yearn for an extemporized, embodied past, free from logocentric shackles. Given incomplete evidence, we project our own interests onto the past. Scholars may feel they have a vested interest in uncovering literary forebears, while performers might identify with strictly oral antecedents. Yet, does a middle ground escape possibility? Shakespeare's plays exude palace intrigue, classical allusion, and fart jokes — each of which appealed to both the Court and peanut-wielding groundlings. Oral tradition scholar Ruth Finnegan notes that equating oral performance with oral culture begs questions of definition, "the distinction between oral and written is not as clear-cut as is sometimes supposed."[19] *Scops* may have passed between literate and spoken, aristocratic and peasant, sacred and profane.

We can posit poetry's ubiquity and democratic provenance. As Thornbury notes, most Anglo-Saxon poems were anonymous.[20] Only one vernacular poem, *Cynewulf*, bears an author's signature, and even then the *scop* (Caedmon) attributes the work to God.[21] Similarly, eddic poems lack authorship. Skaldic names endure, although little evidence exists of *any* written exemplars of Old Norse or Icelandic verse that predate the twelfth century.[22] The best-known *skald*, Snorri Sturluson, occupies an authorial ambiguity akin to Homer. Individual bards could and did achieve renown in their own lifetimes, but Old English and Scandinavian poems have endured, rather than their poets. The oral-formulaic model adequately accounts for a performance tradition that includes works like *Beowulf*, but details of these performances are opaque. The lack of certainty regarding bardic practice provides license for creativity, and makes any adaptation of medieval poetry a theory of ancient performance.

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18. Conquergood 2002, 147.
19. Finnegan 1974, 64.
20. Thornbury 2014, 14.
21. Bragg 1991, 31.
22. Ross 2005, 69.

FLINTS AND HAMMERS

I chose to stage the final third of the *Beowulf* epic (Beowulf's encounter with a dragon) since this section fills an evening's length performance, and epitomizes bardic obsession with moral and cosmological balance. *Beowulf is min nama…* premiered at the Sanders Theatre in the Ft. Worth Community Arts Center in 2008 and I restaged the piece at a found space in Denton, Texas in 2010. Laurie Sanda designed a set that included green and black fabrics that draped in a dragon shape, lit with orange light, and extended out over the audience, as well as a heraldic banner on which to project supertitles.

   Overall, the 3,000-line *Beowulf* poem relates the exploits of Beowulf of the Geats (a tribe in southern Sweden). In the first of three confrontations with supernatural creatures, Beowulf rids Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, of the monster Grendel. In the second episode, Beowulf embarks upon a shamanic-

FIGURE 1. Photographer Donna French.

like journey beneath a lake in order to dispatch Grendel's vengeful mother. *Beowulf is min nama...* treats the third and final episode of the epic — Beowulf's encounter with a dragon. In the performance, I narrate the section's 566 lines in Anglo-Saxon while dancing, and play all of the characters, which include the poem's narrator, Beowulf, an ancient warrior, Beowulf's wary band, his faithful retainer Wiglaf, and the dragon.

The piece begins with a late attack. Beowulf has taken control of the Geats following the demise and defeat of infighting and ineffectual princes at the hands of marauding invaders, such as the "Battle-Scilfings" (*Heaðo-Scilfingas*). Using circular arm movements and sudden level changes while intoning in Anglo-Saxon, I indicated battles and the fall of lords. Cycling through percussive undulations of my torso and controlled rolls and flops to the floor, I eventually came to rest in a single-leg balance, while placing an imaginary crown on my head. Beowulf then rules peacefully for fifty years (*fīftig wintra*), until one day, a thief stumbles into a slumbering dragon's horde and steals a cup, upsetting the great worm's three hundred year slumber. The dragon wakens with the promise of violence, "one began / in the dark nights / a dragon to rule" (*oð ðæt ān ongan / deorcum nihtum / draca rīcsian*) (2210b—2211b). Disappearing behind a triangular suspended fabric form, I juxtaposed crawling, weighted movements with a hissing vocal delivery. Mirroring the dragon's heartbeat, I stomped the rhythm of the text, pantomimed the fleeing thief, and darted as the dragon with low, quick impulses. As the text accelerates, my arms spiraled in widening arcs, punctuated with high leaps and rippling movements to indicate wings stiff from sleep. Finally, I collapsed in a low crouch as the "loathed air flier" (*lāð lyftfloga*) sniffs the air for the scent of the human interloper.

Upon learning that his own home has burned in the dragon's smoldering rage, the elderly Beowulf rises to action and publically dedicates himself to a final quest against a creature of the old world (*Beowulf* may be the earliest instance of the "one last job" thriller), seeking his "fate" (*wyrd*) in the form of a "dragon" (*wyrm*). In so doing, the last third of *Beowulf* ghosts eddic accounts of the end of days (*Ragnarok*). Beowulf stands in for Odin (*Ōðinn*), who leads a self-immolating charge of the gods against chaos, personified in the form of a dragon or giant, which has been eating the roots of the world tree (*Yggdrasil*). The gods win, but also die, and thus great deeds and heroes depart the middle world (*middangeard*).

Throughout *Beowulf is min nama…*, characters emerge through distinctive movement and vocal choices. For example, in the "Lay of the Last Survivor"

FIGURE 2. Beowulf jumping. Photo courtesy of author.

(2247−66), which provides the backstory for the dragon's horde, a wizened warrior laments, "Hold now, earth, now that men cannot, earls' treasure…" (*Heald þū nū, hrūse, / nū hæleð ne mōstan / earla ǣhte…*). I chanted the survivor's lines with heavy chest resonance, mimed carrying barrow stones, and extended my legs in an abstraction of pacing. Wiglaf, spoke in a high register, moved with "light" movement efforts, and danced with linear movements. Similarly, I kinesthetized set pieces and formal boasts, Beowulf's extended recounting of past heroics, and Beowulf's final speech following his self-immolating battle with the dragon. As his lord lays dying, Wiglaf enters the defeated dragon's horde only to find the ancient rotting wreckage of past glory. Retreating upstage while beating on my breast the cadence of the final line, the piece ends with a cynical realization, "treasure easily confounds / gold on the ground / any person / who would try to hide it" (*Sinc ēaðe mæg, / gold on grunde   /   gumcynnes   gehwone   /   oferhígian,   hȳde   sē   ðe   wylle.*) (2764b−2766b). In other words, Wiglaf sees that Beowulf's sacrifice was wasteful.

   The conflation of genres and use of a dead language may seem like a recipe for confusion, yet audience members reported that they made minimal use of the supertitles as the piece progressed, and instead allowed the story to

unfold. As a performer, the piece proved exhausting and exhilarating; the cardiovascular, choreographic, linguistic, and acting challenges mutually supported one another. In fact, certain rehearsal strategies proved efficacious to the point of suggesting underlying patterns in the text, fossils of former performance conventions. In the spirit of experimental performance archaeology, the following are the flints and hammers with which I fashioned my piece.

THE FRISIAN CONNECTION

Since *Beowulf is min nama…* involved narration in Old English, the performance required a theory of dialect, yet we cannot know what English sounded like 1000 years ago for certainty. Even if we could go back in time, accents would have reflected temporal, regional, tribal, class, and individual variance. I made use of author introductions in *Beowulf* translations, Old English textbooks, and online resources. However, knowledge of consonant and vowel pronunciation does not in of itself produce a native-speaker sound. Old English scholars tend to speak Anglo Saxon with their own modern-day accents, which seemed unsatisfying both as a theory dialect and a theatrical choice. Consequently, I turned to modern Frisian poetry, which may represent the direct inheritor of the ancient bardic tradition.

Frisian is a language family on the northern and western coasts of the Netherlands and modern English's closest living language. At one time, the two tongues existed as "Anglo-Frisian," and Frisians either migrated to England or influenced other Germanic tribes passing through their lands on their way to England. Although influenced by Dutch, Frisian serves as a model of how English might have evolved without the influence of Latin-based Norman French. In fact, the University of Paris-Sorbonne-based musician Benjamin Bagby has taken his one-man *Beowulf* to Frisian areas of the Netherlands, in which he chants, declaims, and sings Beowulf's encounter with Grendel, accompanying himself on a reconstructed Anglo-Saxon harp.[23] Bagby relates how Frisian audiences were able to understand Old English, whereas the language is unintelligible to modern English listeners.[24]

Frisian thus became the key component of my ethnopaleography. A European minority language, Frisian is resurging under UNESCO and European Union charters.[25] By 1956, Frisian achieved official bilingual status in Fries-

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23. "Benjamin Bagby's Beowulf," www.bagbybeowulf.com, accessed 25 February 2016.
24. Personal communication, Boston, Massachusetts, November 2008.
25. E.g., Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Article 12 ("Cultural Activities.")

land. The language became a compulsory subject in primary education in 1980, and secondary education in 1993. Frisian won the right for use in local and provincial assemblies in 1995, and in the courts in 1997. Frisian is enjoying a flowering of arts and letters — poetry in particular — and might represent the direct inheritor of the bardic tradition.

Tsjêbbe Hettinga (1949-2013) was a Frisian poet and jazz musician celebrated for live performances of his work. A childhood disease left Hettinga blind, so Hettinga recited his poetry from memory, often with live accompaniment. I used Hettinga's voice as a model for an Old English stage dialect both for his aural qualities, such as his trilled r's and a beat-poet-like delivery, but began to notice paralells in Hettinga's work to qualities of Old English poetry. *In Strange Shores* (*Frjemde kusten*), for instance, Hettinga intones,

> *Oan swarte stielkabels hawwe de bokken*
> *De nacht boppe see en haven úttakele.*
> *De gjalpen fan seefûgels, op it wetter*
> *Yn 'e slomme, binne oernommen troch fammen*
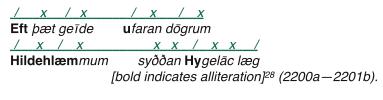> *Dy't op hichte havenjonges befleane. (1—6)*

> *On black as tar steel cables all the derricks*
> *Have hoisted up the night above sea and harbour.*
> *The cries of the seagulls now a-slumber on*
> *The water, have been replaced by the shrill shrieks of*
> *Girls, who dart out to tig lads in the harbour*
> *Laden with sea-salt and foreign tongues.[26]*

The imagery of solitude, waterways, ships, and sea birds recall themes in Anglo-Saxon verse. Hettinga's poetry also contains echoes of Anglo-Saxon rules of prosody. In Old English poetics, verse consists of pairs of half lines, separated by caesurae, or gaps. In any full line of verse, each half line must contain two stressed and two or more unstressed syllables, and the first and/or second stressed syllable of the first half line must alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the second half line. Consequently, the varying number of unstressed syllables, set against a fixed number of stressed syllables, lends the verse a syncopated quality. The most enduring metrical theory across medieval Germanic verse remains nineteenth-century philologist Eduard Sievers' typology.[27] Sievers hypothesized five categories of syllable stress

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26. "Strange Shores," Poetry International Web,
     http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/4584/poem_org_video_left
     /poem_english/0, accessed 7 February 2016.
27. Excellent and concise primers on Old English poetics abound. See, e.g., Mitchell
     & Robinson 1996, 161—67. For Sievers' application to Old Norse metrics, see
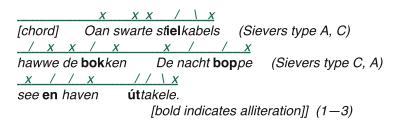   Gade 1995, 35—43.

patterns. For example, the opening lines of my performance read,

<pre>
/   x   / x   / x   / x
</pre>
Eft *þæt geīde*   **u***faran dōgrum*
<pre>
/   x   / x   x x / x x   /
</pre>
Hildehlæm*mum*   *syððan* **Hy***gelāc læg*
                [*bold indicates alliteration*][28] *(2200a—2201b).*

After that,   the days turned,

The hammer of battle,   then Hygelac lay [dead]

In Siever's system, the first three half-lines are type "A" (/ x / x), whereas the fourth half-line is type "B" (x / x / or x x / x x /).[29] Hettinga's verse follows the old bardic constraints. Hettinga emphasizes alliterative consonants with his voice, and the lines themselves follow Old English patterns of stress:

<pre>
              x   x x   / \ x
</pre>
*[chord]   Oan swarte st***iel***kabels   (Sievers type A, C)*
<pre>
 / x   x / x   x /   / x
</pre>
hawwe de **bok***ken   De nacht* **bop***pe   (Sievers type C, A)*
<pre>
 x   / / x   / / \ x
</pre>
see **en** *haven   **út***takele.*
                [*bold indicates alliteration*]] *(1—3)*

The poem's opening lacks an initial half-line, but the video producers begin the clip with a synthesized chord, where a bard might have struck a chord. The second half-line opens with a stream of particles (*swarte* alliterates with *stiel*, but lacks stress, a pattern *Beowulf* uses recurrently).

Likewise, the bilingual Dutch and Frisian poet Albertina Soepboer creates work infused with musicality. In "I'll Never be Your Maggie May," Soepboer writes,

<pre>
 x / x   [/]   x x   x x x x   / x
</pre>
De **rom***ten [pause]   dy't mar net ôfsletten* **rek***ken, (Sievers type A, "Break")*
<pre>
 / x \ x / x   x   /   x /   x
</pre>
dûze*ljende* **no***aten   op 'e* **west***er***stoar***men. (3-4)*[30]
                [*bold indicates alliteration*] *(Sievers type A, C)*

The spaces that never quite got filled,

notes whirling on strong westerly winds.

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28. Old English was more "consonant focused," and vowel sounds might have been more clipped relative to modern English. In any case, within Old English poetry, all vowel sound pairing can count as alliteration.

29. Metrics is a contentious field, and different ears will arrive at alternative scansions.

30. "I'll Never be Your Maggie May," Poetry Web International, http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/4065/auto/0/ILL-NEVER-BE-YOUR-MAGGIE-MAY, accessed 7 February 2016.

Like Hettinga, Soepboer incorporates ancient structures in her poetry. The first line conforms to Anglo-Saxon requirements for alliteration. The second full line does not, but the English translation goes out of its way to alliterate ("whirling," "westerly," "winds"). The first half-line lacks a second downbeat, so Soepboer (perhaps unconsciously) takes a pause in its place when she speaks her verse. The second half-line contains a string of particle words to introduce an idea (see next section).

As well as exhibiting ancient bardic prosody, Soepboer's work suffuses with musicality. In reviewing Soepboer's collection *Zone*, critic Herbert Sleeves notes, "Music goes beyond the language. When words cannot, sounds even reach the other, even the sound of the language," and notes allusions to the popular band *Coldplay* in Soepboer's lines.[31] Soepboer listens to music while she writes, such as the Bristol-based *Portishead*, and, more recently, "spherical space music."[32] Soepboer has written poetry as lyrics for musicians (and also theatre), and musicians have taken or adapted her poems for songs.[33] Like Hettinga, her verse follows an underlying rhythmicity informed by primordial patterns. Bardic conventions endure, embedded in northern European language and poetry.
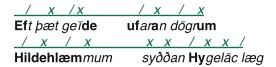
RHYTHM

Sievers' proved an imperfect system. The typology requires ever-expanding variations that begin to resemble the cycles and epicycles of pre-Copernican cosmology. A competing approach, pioneered by John C. Pope, interprets Old English verse as a duple-meter musical time signature, with stressed syllables as downbeats.[34] Pope's approach complements Sievers', for example, explaining that missing downbeats indicate places where bards could have strummed a chord (like the beginning of Hettinga's *Strange Shores*). Subsequent metrical models build on Sievers and Pope's work.[35] As a dancer, I found Pope's rhythmic approach intuitive, especially when taking to heart an old textbook's advice that "metronome-minded moderns" should loosen their
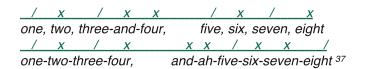
31. Mouwden, 13 Jan. 2006.
32. Soepboer relates, "Nu luister ik naar sferische spacemuziek, soms duurt een nummer bijna een uur en zelden zit er tekst onder." Borrel, 21 January 2015.
33. Albertina Soepboer interview with Remco Ekkers, "de realiteit een kwartslag draaien," http://home.planet.nl/~ekker036/albsoepboer.html, accessed 7 February 2016.
34. Pope 1981 (1966).
35. In addition to Sievers and Pope, current metrical analysis relies on Bliss 1958; Kendall builds on Sievers & Pope & Bliss 1991.

sense of tempo in using Pope's approach, "Even if the *scop* used a harp to keep his rhythm regular there is no certainty that he did not use rhetorical pauses, prolongations for emphasis, and other devices which to a modern musician would seem quite irregular."[36] In fact, "pauses, prolongations [--] and other [rhythmic] devices" would strike a contemporary jazz musician as entirely appropriate. For me, clapping, stomping, or walking on the beat while speaking the lines, allowing unstressed syllables to speed up or slow down, proved dramatic in facilitating memorization.

To take a simple example, in the first two lines of my performance,

$$
\begin{array}{ll}
\underline{/\quad x \quad /x} & \underline{/\ x\ \ /\ \ x} \\
\textbf{Ef}t\ þæt\ ge\bar{\imath}\textbf{de} & \textbf{uf}aran\ d\bar{o}g\textbf{r}um \\
\underline{/\ \ x\ \ /\ \ \ x} & \underline{x\ \ x\ \ /\ \ x\ \ x\ \ /} \\
\textbf{Hildehlæm}mum & syð\eth an\ \textbf{Hy}gel\bar{a}c\ læg
\end{array}
$$

rather than assigning categories "A, A, A, B," according to Sievers, I translated them into dance "counts." The first two full lines thus became the rhythmic pattern,

$$
\begin{array}{ll}
\underline{/\quad x\quad\ \ /\quad x\quad x} & \underline{/\quad x\quad /\quad\quad x} \\
\textit{one, two, three-and-four,} & \textit{five, six, seven, eight} \\
\underline{/\quad x\quad\ /\quad x} & \underline{x\ x\quad /\quad x\quad x\quad\ /} \\
\textit{one-two-three-four,} & \textit{and-ah-five-six-seven-eight}\ [37]
\end{array}
$$

As a dancer, thinking in terms of beats rather than stress connected the challenge of line memorization to daily tools of studio work. The text became a rhythmic "score" to which I could walk, clap, or otherwise move through space. Combining embodied rhythmicity with attention to alliterative word pairs *geīde / ufaran* (vowels alliterated in Old English) and *Hilde / hlæmmum / Hygelāc*, I found I could learn this, and all subsequent lines. Conversely, difficulty in memorization almost always indicated mistakes in scansion.

Rhythm became central to the rehearsal process. In performance, I allowed the rhythms to retreat in the same way that a Shakespearean actor feels the underlying pulse of iambic pentameter but does not overemphasize its drumbeat on stage. In learning the text, however, rhythm proved invaluable. Also, poetic rhythms informed choreographic choices. For example, *syððan* in the

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36. Cassidy & Ringler 1971, 275.
37. This is a dancer's adaptation of Pope's work. Pope himself would have written the rhythm in musical notation, set to a 4/8 time signature. See Cassidy & Ringler 1971, 265—88 for a primer on classical approaches to Old English versification, including Sievers and Pope. Also, the initial geī¬— in "geīde" could be scanned as a glide, which suggests a movement response as well.

fourth half line works as a "pickup" before a downbeat (and-ah-one), a feature of popular songs today. As information for choreography, *syððan* intimated a catch-step, a sudden change of direction, or some other counter-time gesture. Ancient bards may not have used rhythm as a memory aid in the same way, but rhythmic textures are undoubtedly present, and helped me learn almost six hundred lines of verse quickly.

Rhythmicity also evoked cross-cultural parallels. Old English is a synthetic language, meaning that word inflections signal parts of speech, creating fluid syntax. In contrast, modern English has evolved into an analytic language, in which word order and prepositions carry a greater semantic load. For example, "Daphne bit the dog" and "the dog bit Daphne" differ in modern English but not Old English, since word endings would have indicated who is biting whom. Old English therefore enjoys freedom in word order, and can take advantage of syntactic flexibility for prosodic effect. A new thought sometimes begins with a string of particles, such as:

$$x \quad x \quad x \quad x \quad / \quad x \qquad / \quad \backslash \quad x \quad /$$
*Se wæs on ðam **ðrea**te* **þreot***teoða secg (2406a—b)*

The first four syllables are function words, culled from the complete sentence and fronted to the top of a phrase. The line literally means, *"He was in that* troop / thirteenth man." The poet could have chosen different word orders without changing the meaning. However, this sequence puts four unaccented syllables at the front of the line, creating a rhythmic introduction to a new idea. Not every new idea begins with a string of unaccented function words, and not all strings begin with new ideas, but *Beowulf* begins new thoughts with pulses of particles often enough to suggest poetic convention.

Old English scholars have discussed the use of particle strings as rhythmic signals at length. However, medievalists might be surprised to learn that the same technique exists in other contexts. In a typical "West African" dance class (usually focusing on traditional steps from nations such as Ghana, Senegal, and Mali), dancers repeat movements as directed by the teacher, in the center of the room or across the floor, until the master drummer plays a distinctive rhythmic pattern called a "break," at which point class members cycle to the next dance step in a sequence.[38] Dancers listen for breaks within the soundscape of *djembe* and *dunun* drums, as well as polyrhythm in the dance steps themselves. Newcomers may have difficulty hearing rhythmic signals, yet those enculturated in the rhythm-language interpret the break as

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38.   For examples of breaks, see Kalani & Carmara 2006.

a clear auditory-to-kinesthetic command.[39] *Beowulf* uses similar rhythmic signals to indicate thematic shifts.

Applying embodiment and rhythm as a critical lens for close readings of bardic poetry also suggests an avenue for future practice-based research. As dance scholar Eric Stanley points out, English lacked a word for "dance" until the twelfth century.[40] Christian translators resorted to terms like *tumbian*, *hoppian*, or *hleapeð* (tumble, hop, leap). According to a strict application of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits a correspondence between words and concepts in a culture, an absence of a term for dance in Old English indicates that citizens of Old English cultures did not dance for seven-hundred years, a result which defies both common sense and archaeological evidence.[41] The existence of patterns and signals in English and Scandinavian verse indicates rhythmic patterns that were present in ancient cultures generally. The same patterns would have been available for use in other modes, such as ancient sword or warrior dances, social dance forms, or folk songs. One approach to recovering ancient English and northern European performance forms might be to use metrical analysis of poems as percussion scores. Drummers or drum ensembles could play the rhythms of poems like *Beowulf*, and theatre, dance, and ethnomusicology scholars could listen to and interpret the results.

STITCHES

During rehearsal, or while muttering lines on a treadmill or during a jog, extended passages of the *Beowulf* text flowed from memory. Recall felt effortless and secure. Other locations in the text conveyed a sense of nexus, an interstitial quality, or a momentary blindness. Such moments of departure from the world of the poem felt like a needle exiting material and before reentering at the next stitch. Once the needle reentered the fabric of the tale, memory returned. The moments of free floating were vertiginous. I had the experience many times in rehearsal of repeating an earlier passage with no idea how I had doubled up the stitch. Evocatively, these snags occurred at

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39. The comparison of pre-Norman English with sub-Saharan African performance traditions may seem incongruous if not problematic, yet this research line has proven generative. For examples from Xhosa and Zulu poetry, see Opland 1080, 19-27. The most sophisticated comparative analysis to date is perhaps Finnegan 2007.
40. Stanley 1991, 18—31.
41. The debate between "linguistic relativity" and universalist approaches to grammar remains contentious. Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and their followers argued that culture and language influence one another. See, e.g., Whorf 1956. For a cognitivist alternative, see Lakoff 1987.

specific and recurring places.

For example, I consistently confused the moment when Beowulf's retainers broach the news that the dragon has incinerated his home,

> *Þā wæs Bīowulfe   brōga gecȳðed*
> *snūde tō sōðe,   þæt his sylfes hām,*
> *bolda sēlest,   brynewylmum mealt,*
> *gifstōl Gēata. (2324a—2327a)*
>
> *Then they spoke   the terror to Beowulf,*
> *quickly the truth: that his own home,*
> *finest of buildings,   gift-throne of Geats,*
> *had melted in the branding surge.*

with a part of Beowulf' final speech before resolving to pursue the dragon, in which he reminisces on the history of intertribal warfare:

> *Þā wæs synn ond sacu   Swēona ond Gēata,*
> *ofer wīd wæter   wrōht gemǣne,*
> *herenīð hearda,   syððan Hrēðel swealt (2472a—2474b)*
>
> *Then came mayhem and pillage.   Swedes and Geats*
> *shared an enmity   over wide water,*
> *a hard hatred,   when Hrethel died*

At the start of the second passage, I tended to jump back to 2324a, and not realize the error until a natural pause about seventy lines later (around line 2390), by which time Beowulf had commissioned a dragon-resistant shield, rejected an army to accompany him in favor of a small band of retainers, and relived a swimming feat from his youth.

"Double stiches", points at which I would loop back to earlier sections, tended to happen when new ideas began with similar invocations, as in the above example. At the same time, the regularity of this phenomenon suggests an architectural feature in the verse and supports Parry and Lord's theory of themes – that stories occur in blocks. The spaces between oral-formulaic themes were risky places with the potential for getting lost in the narrative. Perhaps ancient bards prepared for these points during performance, marking transitions from one theme to another with instrumental interludes, musical shifts, or extended pauses.

CONCLUSION

In sum, *Beowulf is min nama…* reveals possible functional roles that prosodic elements played in ancient performance. The exact methods and modes of *scops*, *skalds*, eddic poets, and other performers across England and Scandinavia may never become fully recoverable, but practice-based research can

provide hints. The *Beowulf* text contains densely textured rhythmic structures that act as blueprints for enactment, traces of performance modes that persist in Frisian poetry, as exemplified by artists like Hettinga and Soepboer. A larger lesson is that performing artists and scholars have much to offer one another in retrieving past performance practices. Despite changing conventions and aesthetics, basic problems of performance remain the same. The performance equivalent to experimental archaeology holds the potential for artists and scholars to work in partnership in order to hear the muted songs of a distant past.

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THE AUTHOR
Jeff Kaplan is a doctoral candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, and holds an MFA in Dance from Texas Woman's University. After a career in modern dance, Kaplan developed a repertory of solo works that combine spoken text with movement, based in foreign and ancient languages. In addition to *Beowulf* (Anglo-Saxon), Kaplan has dramatized Goethe's poem, *Der Erlkönig* (German), and the "Witch of Endor" from the *Book of Samuel* (Samuel 1:28) (Hebrew and Aramaic). Other research interests include early twentieth-century American theatre history, history of solo performance, translation theory, and dramaturgy.