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SINGING THE STORY: NARRATIVE VOICE AND THE OLD ENGLISH *SCOP*¹

By *Lisa M. Horton*

Abstract The picture of Anglo-Saxon society that we receive through its literature is a direct result of the life of the Old English *scop*. His personality and experiences filter into the stories that he tells and provide nuanced interpretations of both histories and legends, while his position within Anglo-Saxon society allows him direct access to the great events and persons of his time. As an active participant in his society, at the feet or even at the right hand of a king, he wields profound influence; as an observer and commentator on his society, he records and interprets both reality and fiction. Comprehension of narrative voice in Old English poetry depends on understanding the function, development, and complex social position of the *scop* who authors and disseminates this literature. This focused examination of three poems, *Widsið*, *Deor*, and *Beowulf*, provides a functional description of the professional life of the Old English *scop*.

*Þæt ic bi me sylfum // secgan wille,
 þæt ic hwile wæs // Heodenigna scop,
 dryhtne dyre. // Me wæs Deor noma.
 Ahte ic fela wintra // folgað tilne,
 holdne hlaford, // oppæt Heorrenda nu,
 leoðcræftig monn // londryht gebah,
 þæt me eorla hleo // ær gesealde.
 Þæs ofereode, // þisses swa mæg.*

Deor 35-42

[This I will say of myself, that I used to be *scop* to the Heodenings and dear to my lord. I was called Deor. For many winters I was in good service, loyal to my master. Now another, Heorrenda, a man skilled in poetry, received the landright that the protector of warriors formerly gave to me. That passed away, so may this.²]

1. Introduction

Within the canon of extant poetry in Old English³, there are three poems that not only demonstrate the art of the poet, but also provide useful insight into the lives of

¹ The whole profession encompassing musician, poet, jester, and lore-master is vast, making a study of the whole impracticable for my purpose. These varied professions, though relying on similar disciplines, are quite distinct in Anglo-Saxon society and are described using very different Old English words: *þyle*, *scop*, *gleoman*, *wopþora*, and *leoþwyrhta*. The subset of the profession that I am interested in is only the group of people categorized by the word *scop*. For a very complete discussion of the larger issue, see Opland (230-56).

² My translation—as some of the translations herein are mine and some are not, I carefully note which is which throughout.

³ I make a conscious decision not to approach the vexed question of date assignment for any of these poems, although there are several well-reasoned debates on the subject. For *Widsið*, see Joyce Hill's

the professional verse-makers who created them. It is surprising that these poems have not received more scholarly attention in this respect. These works survive for our examination due to the *scops* who first sang them and to their fellows who learned them as part of their repertoire. These professional singers repeated the poems until they became such an integral part of the culture that, when later Anglo-Saxon society in England began to document its oral traditional literature, such poems were preserved in the resulting manuscripts. Two of the poems, *Widsið* and *Deor*, are found in the Exeter Book.⁴ The third, of course, is *Beowulf*, part of the manuscript described as Cotton Vitellius A.xv.⁵ *Widsið* is a poem about a *scop*, albeit a fictionalized one. *Deor* is a philosophical poem whose narrator is a displaced *scop*. *Beowulf* contains so many lines either about a *scop* or spoken by a *scop* that an argument could be made that it is more about that profession than about the hero whose exploits it narrates. Other poems do mention either the professional *scop* or the amateur court singer or harper, such as Cynewulf in *Elene* and even *Riddle 89*, but the references are too fleeting to contribute substantially to an examination of the profession itself.⁶ Comprehension of narrative voice in Old English poetry depends on understanding the function, development, and complex societal position of the *scop* who authors and disseminates this literature.⁷ A focused examination of these three poems, *Widsið*, *Deor*, and *Beowulf*, provides a surprisingly clear picture of the professional life of the Old English *scop*.

2. Limitations of this Examination

Certain aspects of the profession of court singer in Old English culture are completely undiscoverable due simply to a total absence of data. For example, the first question that any modern musician would ask is what the court singer sings—not the words but the music. Unfortunately, apart from some fascinating speculation by several scholars (particularly John Nist) on the rhythmic patterns and scansion in Old English poetry, it is impossible to reproduce or even definitively to describe the music.⁸ There are neither known notation systems nor extant scores for this period (Wrenn 122).⁹

The other virtually fruitless question any musician would ask about these performances involves instrumentation. There are many references to the harp in the Old English canon. In *Beowulf*, the Lay of the Last Survivor contains a poignant reminiscence of the “*hearpan wyn*” [harp-delights] which are no more in the barrow of the

⁴ Excerpts from *Deor* and *Widsið* are also taken from Klinck. *Beowulf* excerpts are taken from Heaney’s facing-page translation.

⁵ I am indebted to Professor Tolkien for providing an explanation of manuscript description notation: “The manuscript in which *Beowulf* is found is London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv (the manuscript name means that it was part of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton’s collection of manuscripts in the seventeenth century, and that it was stored on a shelf under the bust of the Roman emperor Vitellius; it was the fifteenth manuscript on the shelf)” (164).

⁶ Brooke believes *Riddle 89* to be both by and about Cynewulf (8).

⁷ Opland connects the profession of *scop* with the verb *scieppan*, meaning to create or to form (Opland 232; Bright 463).

⁸ Nist does a very thorough, if bafflingly complex, study of halfline metrical cadences in *Beowulf* and concludes that the use of the harp could have been something like the background jazz band in a ‘50s poetry reading (28-29).

⁹ Some isolated pieces of information about the *scop*’s performance practice are available from passing references in other works. Anderson asserts, “He usually occupied a seat of honour near the king and remained seated while reciting his poems, accompanying himself with the harp” (38). Wrenn repeats this assertion, citing lines 80-81 from *The Fortunes of Men*: “*Sum sceal mid hearpan // aet his hlafordes / fotum sittan, // feoh thicgan*” [A certain one shall, sitting at his lord’s feet with the harp, receive riches] (qtd in Wrenn 125).

lost people (line 2262). In *Widsið*, the poet recalls a particular performance:

*Donne wit Scilling // sciran reorde
for uncrum sigedryhtne // song ahofan,
hlude bi hearpan // hleoþor swinsade,
þonne monige men // modum wlonce,
wordum sprecan, // þa þe wel cuþan,
þæt hi næfre song // sellan ne hyrdon.* (103-108)

[When Scilling and I, with ringing voices, performed a song before our victorious lord, the singing in clear harmony with the harp, many a proud-spirited man of great discernment in the art admitted he had never heard a better song (Dronke 127).]

If Wrenn's theory is correct, *Widsið* has actually named his harp Scilling (120). Although Dronke interprets his translation as a reference to two performers singing in unison, Wrenn's alternative is just as plausible. If he is wrong, this passage still proves that the harp was used as accompaniment to vocal performances. Even outside these three poems, the harp comes up again and again, notably in *Genesis A*, *Caedmon*, and even *Riddle 70* (Boenig 295; Bright 127; Wrenn 126-127). Unfortunately, here again an exact description is problematic. It is possible to assert that the harp most common in this period was a small lap harp or lyre on the order of the Sutton Hoo replica based on this passage in the story of Caedmon, recounted by Bede: "*Onð hē for þon oft in gebēorscipe, þonne þær wæs blisse intinga gedemed þæt hēo ealle scalde þurh endebyrdness be hearpan singan, þonne hē geseah þā hearpan him nēalēcan, þonne ārās hē for scome from þæm symble onð hām ēode tō his hūse*" [Because often in fellowship, when for the sake of merriment it was decided that they all should sing with the harp in turn, when he saw the harp approaching him, then he arose for shame from the feast and went home to his house] (Caedmon 15-18, qtd in Bright 127).¹⁰ Clearly the harp is approaching Caedmon (note the dative pronoun "him"), not the other way around; therefore, the harp, being passed from one reveler to the next, must be small enough to make this practical.¹¹

3. The Professional Functions of a Scop

Many other aspects of the scop's professional existence, however, can be extrapolated from the three available and most relevant texts. They provide many descriptions of the various functions of the scop. The first and most prevalent of these functions is that of entertainer. In *Beowulf*, the scop is first introduced as the principle entertainer in Heorot and thus, incidentally, the primary incitement for Grendel's wrath:

*Ða se ellen-gáest // earfoðlice
þrāge gepolode, // sē þe in þystrum bād,*

¹⁰ My translation. The Sutton Hoo replica, based on the remnants of an instrument found in the excavation of the ship burial, has the dimensions of 8 ¼" wide by ¾" deep by 29 1/8" long.

¹¹ My argument for the practicality or otherwise of passing the harp is not merely hypothetical. I have taken part in musical sessions where harps are used. A lap harp of the Sutton Hoo kind can be passed from hand to hand without difficulty. The British Museum replica of the Sutton Hoo instrument has the approximate dimensions of seven inches wide by two inches deep by thirty-six inches long and is made of maple, a relatively light-weight hardwood. A triangular floor harp, even of the comparatively small 29-string variety, is too unwieldy. Jess Bessinger discusses in detail and at length the Sutton Hoo replica and its implications for musicology for the period.

*þæt hē dōgora gehwām // drēam gehyrde
hlūdne in healle // þær wæs hearpan swēg,
swutol sang scopes. (lines 86-90)*

[Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him / to hear the din of the loud banquet / every day in the hall, the harp being struck / and the clear song of a skilled poet (Heaney 8-9).¹²]

As the *scop* here joyously sings the story of creation, he entertains the loud gathering of warriors at their ease, just before Grendel's first recorded attack. Later in the poem, after Beowulf defeats Grendel, Hrothgar and his people celebrate the victory in their reclaimed feasthall. After Hrothgar presents the victorious warriors with gifts, his court poet entertains the company with another recitation. Although the song's content is the tragic story of Hildeburh and her sorrows, the occasion dictates that the song's purpose is still primarily entertainment:

*Þær wæs sang ond swēg // samod ætgædere
fore Healfdenes // hilde-wīsan,
gomen-wudu grēted, // gid oft wrecen,
ðonne heal-gamen // Hrōþgāres scop
æfter medo-bence // mǣnan scolde:— (lines 1062-1066)*

[They sang then and played to please the hero, / words and music for their warrior prince, / harptunes and tales of adventure: / there were high times on the hall benches / and the king's poet performed his part (Heaney 70-71).]

Here the poet is specifically referred to as "*Hrōþgares scop*." The celebration demands entertainment and the *scop* dutifully provides pithy, dramatic poetry.¹³

A second function of the poet, also exemplified by the *scop* in *Beowulf*, is that of observer and recorder of important events. After Beowulf delivers Hrothgar and his people from Grendel, the *scop* demonstrates this function by crafting a new song both to record the historical event of the death of the legendary monster and to preserve Beowulf's name alongside the famous heroes of legend:

*Hwīlum cyniges þegn,
guma gilp-hlæden, // gidda gemyndig,
sē ðe eal-fela // eald-gesegna
worn gemunde, // word oþer fand
sōðe gebunden. // Secg eft ongan
sīð Bēowulfes // snyttrum styrian
ond on spēd wrecan // spel gerāde,
wordum wrixlan. (lines 867b-874a)*

[Meanwhile, a thane / of the king's household, a carrier of tales, / a traditional singer

¹² The picture Heaney draws of Grendel's aversion to the "din" of harp and poet is particularly vivid.

¹³ The inclusion of this song at this point in *Beowulf* has drawn a great deal of critical attention. The *scop*'s choice of song provides thematic links in the poem and clearly foreshadows both an imminent and brutal attack from Grendel's outraged mother and the more distant doom of the Danish kingdom resulting from just the sort of poorly-executed alliance described in the *scop*'s song. Despite the meta-thematic significance of its inclusion for the literary text, however, the *scop*'s performance clearly provides entertainment for the gathering.

deeply schooled / in the lore of the past, linked a new theme / to a strict meter. The man started / to recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's / triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines, / entwining his words (Heaney 58-59).]

In the lines that follow, the narrator makes it clear that the poet makes a direct connection between Beowulf and "Sigemunde," the legendary dragon-slayer in the song he composes for this occasion.¹⁴ Then the poet sings an abridgement of Sigemunde's entire history, bringing in Beowulf at the end to cap the story and emphasize the fame the warrior has won. Stephen Evans states, "actually witnessing the events recounted in his poems would have made a poet's praise, recited in the hall in front of the other warriors, all the more satisfying to the participants than had he relied on second-hand accounts" (12). This dual role of observer and recorder is key to the *scop*'s profession, although it does potentially problematize his position. The *scop* duly records and praises suitably praiseworthy deeds, thus encouraging his lord's followers to display such courage and prowess in battle as would justify the song of the *scop*. However, the *scop* also serves a lord, and is duty-bound to record only such events as bring no dishonor to his employer. In *Beowulf*, one of the most notable features of the *scop*'s and even the poet's own narrative is the very faint praise for Hrothgar himself. Though introduced to the poem as "*helm Schyldinga*," [protector of the Scyldings] it is Hrothgar's inability to protect his people that necessitates Beowulf's involvement in the first place (line 456). The king's twelve-year exile from his own meadhall, though successfully brought to an end through the intervention of Beowulf, constitutes an unspoken source of shame to both Hrothgar and his warriors. Unable to drive the invader from their midst, they are forced to rely on the prowess of an outsider. Thus, the *scop* sings his song of Beowulf's victory whilst walking a difficult edge between the propriety of praising the savior of the community and the impropriety of seeming to censure their erstwhile unsuccessful protector. Of course, the events that a *scop* can record do not always take place within his lord's own court.

In *Widsið*, the titular poet's most striking function is that of a traveling performer. Indeed, his very name means far-traveler (Brooke 1). It is the range of his alleged travels that provides one of the first clues for a modern audience that the poet is fictional. He claims to have been everywhere from the far north "*mid Geatum*" to the Middle East "*mid Persum*" (lines 58 and 84). Of course, the mere experiences are insufficient to the profession of the *scop*; he must also be able to encapsulate those experiences in poetry and communicate them to his audience. In the same poem he gives fleeting examples of his skill as he reviews the catalogue of his many and generous patrons.

For a *scop* posted to a lord's or king's court, of course, his principal function is publicizing the deeds of his patron. L.F. Anderson verifies the importance of this function to the professional *scop*, saying, "that which more than anything else won for the singer the favour of the great was the power he possessed of extending through his songs the fame of those whom he praised" (35-36). *Widsið* knows his function and its importance to any potential new patron: "Even great kings are but little, [Widsið] thinks, without their singer. In his hands their history lies, and their

¹⁴ The presence of the story of "Sigemunde" (alias Siegfried, alias Sigurd in Germanic legend) in *Beowulf* also points out both the widespread disbursement pattern and the surprising longevity of scop-carried legends.

honor” (Brooke 5). French summarizes this poet’s offered services: “[Widsið] promises the patron that he, like Eormenric, will be extolled, not for qualities that he never possessed or acts he never performed, but for a generosity entirely within the *scop*’s cognizance” (630). Widsið’s catalogues of satisfied patrons who have richly rewarded him ably demonstrate his awareness of his duty as *scop* to bring glory to the name of his lord and clearly signals his willingness to perform that duty for his next prospective patron.

Another vital function of the *scop*’s profession is fictionalizing the events of real life and storycrafting. Anne Klinck points out that Deor’s very name is probably a fiction: “Deor does not appear in the Hild story—or elsewhere in heroic literature...Whereas the other proper names in the poem belong to heroic legend, Deor seems to be an imaginary figure” (167). The poet simply states, “*Me wæs Deor noma.*”¹⁵ Klinck further discusses the various critical theories surrounding the name of the poet, but concludes, “whether an epithet or a regular proper name, ‘Deor’ reflects the speaker’s respected status at the court of the Heodenings—a status which he no longer enjoys” (168). *Widsið* also fictionalizes and exaggerates the life of a *scop*. As Graham Caie notes, “it is clear that no single man could have lived long enough to have been with all the rulers that the *Widsið*-poet claims to have served, and that we are dealing with a fictional character” (83). Michael Swanton summarizes:

To suppose that [*Widsið*] represents anything other than an imaginative interpretation of the historical circumstances would be mistaken. The purportedly autobiographical details of Widsið’s [sic] journey to the court of the Gothic king Eormenric are given a legendary rather than factual framework, reflecting a situation which had passed away even in the fourth century. (36)

The poets’ skills in fictionalizing their experiences demonstrate their abilities as storytellers and composers of new tales.

The role of the *scop* is vital to his society. More than merely an entertainer, more than a promoter of warriors’ or kings’ reputations, more even than a recorder of history, the *scop* is a teacher and a guardian of community. As Stephen Evans observes: “The poetry paid special attention to the duties and obligations owed by both chieftain and warriors to one another in the lord-retainer relationship, which was the fundamental basis, the permanent foundation, upon which the comitatus structure and its heroic value-system were built” (16). Hrothgar’s *scop* in *Beowulf* demonstrates his skill in this role by the care with which he recites the story of Hildeburh with its example of the chaos and tragedy that follows upon the breaking of oaths (lines 1070-1159a). The *Widsið* and *Deor* poets, though they do not tell of particular communities, still demonstrate by their references that they too know instructional tales of the idealized, correctly functioning society and can produce them when such lessons are required.

4. The Professional Development of a Scop

The early phase of a *scop*’s career involves traveling, listening, and gathering a

¹⁵ Line 37. Various interpretations of the name “Deor” range from Michael Swanton’s plaintive “‘Dear’ was my name,” and Anne Klinck’s preferred “bold,” to W. Bolton’s disparaging “animal” (Swanton 45; Klinck 167; qtd in Klinck 167). However the name is translated, the poignancy of the line is that the verb is past-tense; no one calls him “Deor” anymore.

repertoire. Speaking to the poet's necessarily sizeable repertoire, French states, "the author of [Beowulf] alluded or referred knowingly to some sixty probably historical persons and some twenty-five events" (626). He goes on to speak of *Widsið's* catalogue of famous persons: "The ancient name-lists incorporated into the poem must have been quoted exactly as modern scholars have conjectured. They were part of a well-taught minstrel's stock in trade. They were the table of contents of his repertory—or at least, so he would have his hearers believe" (629). Caie speculates that the *Widsið* catalogue serves as "a mnemonic poem that might help a poet remember the major figures of heroic legend" (82). French also makes a good case for poets' accurate preservation of their material: "[Widsið] was just the sort of work that, once introduced among *scops*, was likely to undergo little change so long as people would listen to stories about the ancient Germanic heroes" (629). French further notes an incident which demonstrates the profound truth of this phenomenon: "One of the Icelandic visitors to Harald's court completely satisfied the king as to the accuracy of his narrative about the king's own deeds in the Eastern Empire, and this although he had picked up his story from another poet at an assembly" (626). Therefore, the *scop* is responsible not only for hearing, learning, and remembering a respectable repertoire, but also for insuring that it is not modified in error. Especially if the subject of a heroic lay is still living, it is obviously important to the *scop* not to make factual mistakes in his performance. With legendary material, presumably, the *scop* has more margin for adjustment.¹⁶

The primary phase of the *scop's* career consists of residence with and service to a single principle patron. The principle *scop* in *Beowulf* is attached to Hrothgar's service and presumably retains his position for as long as Hrothgar is king.¹⁷ At the same time the most immediate goal of both the *Widsið* and the *Deor* poet is to acquire and keep a generous patron. French describes the poet's search for an employer as exemplified by *Widsið*:

His ultimate aim in composing the poem or in reciting it subsequently was to interest a patron in supporting him...to attract a patron, the poet must achieve two successes: he must persuade possible employers that he was thoroughly competent; and he had to assure them that they might count upon a fitting return for their liberality. (623)

Swanton speculates on this ultimate goal in regard to rhetorical strategies of *Widsið* and *Deor*, "it is not insignificant that these are mere pseudonyms. Their verse is necessarily anonymous since its function is to serve their patrons' reputation [sic] rather than their own. The client's urgent priority was for fame in his own lifetime" (9). Caie defines the relationship between patron and *scop* as a simple exchange of glory for treasure: "Poets were more than mere entertainers, they could make or break one's reputation and give or withhold immortality" (84). Evans elaborates on the specifics by saying:

Lords rewarded poets handsomely because their chief duties – the recitation

¹⁶ Such latitude towards the tales of ancient times might partly explain regional variants in the details of such legends as those of Eormenric and Sigemund.

¹⁷ Or, indeed, for as long as Hroðgar lives. Once the king is dead, of course, the *scop's* status, no longer linked to that of his powerful protector and employer, is freely in play. Either the *scop* fights and dies alongside his king just like any other member of the warband, or he runs away branded a coward.

of genealogies, the composition and recitation of narrative and eulogistic poetry, and the publicizing of reputations – centered on the promotion of the lord’s status in particular, and of the well-being and smooth functioning of his warband in general. (15)

Indeed the community leverage that the poet wields is substantial. Evans goes on to explain, “in a society where the active promotion of one’s reputation was all-important, the poet’s chief weapons – overt satire or subtle omission – must have ensured that the poet was treated with respect by all members of a warband” (14). While the *scop* occupies that privileged position in his master’s favor, his status is assured; however, the system is not always stable.

When a poet is displaced, his career enters a transitional, sometimes ultimate phase. This is spent in self-promotion and demonstration of prowess in the pursuit of further gainful employment as evidenced by *Widsið* and *Deor*. French argues that this stage of the *scop*’s career is neither unusual nor particularly awkward for him: “There is, indeed, every probability that the *scop* had to consider self-advertisement a normal part of his professional task, and an appeal for support [as in *Widsið*, is] the most natural act in the world” (630). Norman Eliason, in his commentary on both of these poems concludes that they both demonstrate the poets’ efforts to acquire new positions and patrons, albeit by greatly varying strategies. He explains that in the vast exaggerations of *Widsið*, “the poet is not idly indulging his fancy nor foolishly embellishing his fiction. He is simply urging claims far beyond any he could possibly make or hope to get for himself. This is the well-known begging dodge of asking for the moon in the hope of getting acheeseparang” (Eliason 188).¹⁸ After an examination of the references to Norse legends in *Deor*, Klinck discovers that the *scop* who displaced him was both a famous success and an important player in a notorious intrigue. She points out, “evidently Heorrenda was a legendary minstrel with fabulous powers. *Deor*’s own prowess is implied by associating him with such a figure” (168). The code of honor in professional competition among poets demonstrated in *Deor* seems similar to the warriors’ code. Clearly it is a grievous hardship for *Deor* to lose this patronage, but there is no dishonor in losing it to such an opponent. He does not seem unduly to resent his competitor for the outcome, calling him without apparent irony a “*leodcræftig monn*” [man skilled with his hands] (line 40). This honorable defeat may be analogous to Beowulf’s death while destroying the dragon—the loss is still a loss, but ultimately the conflict accrues still more credit to his reputation.

5. The Position of the Scop

The societal position of the *scop* allows him direct access to the great events and persons of his time and provides opportunity for the creation and dissemination of literary interpretation of these events. As Anderson points out, “of the professional singers definitely mentioned in Anglo-Saxon literature, two, *Deor* and *Hrothgar*’s *scop*, are especially spoken of as attached in that capacity to the court of a chief or king, and the *scop* of *Widsið* in all likelihood occupies a similar position” (7). This highest level access to the events of his society allows the *scop* both to observe and to

¹⁸ I agree with Eliason on this point regarding *Widsið*, despite his minimizing the societal role and status of the *scop*.

record that society, albeit within potentially problematic limitations. The singer in *Beowulf* examines the battle scene and Grendel's corpse, then composes his song in the hero's praise. This argues for a very privileged status for the *scop*, in significant contrast to Eliason's theory of the *Beowulf scop* as a mere jester.¹⁹ In addition to the *scop*'s access to events that happen at court and position of official observer, Evans argues that the poet is also a regular participant in the activities of the warband: "The fact that the poet shared with his lord and fellow warriors the hardships and dangers of the campaign trail, rather than remain at court in relative ease and comfort, would have served to strengthen his ties to those who fought, and accorded him more respect for his position" (13). His participation provides him with the dual perspective of fellow warrior among the others of his lord's retainers, and independent observer and commentator on the occurrences in which he takes part.²⁰

Not only is the *scop* able to observe, record, and participate in the society and events of his time, but also he has access to a varied audience which would receive his works. From the evidence of these texts, the audience of the Old English *scop* was familiar with a startling volume of legends and stories. The *scop* must take this into account when creating and repeating his repertoire. As Caie points out, "it would appear...that the *Deor* and *Widsið* poets *expect* us to know the many allusions to the names of ancient rulers and legends, although the poems are not about these characters" (81). Also, the poet must compose his works to optimize their performative nature. In particular, "the opening lines of a poem...are crucial...the poet designs his major rhetorical strategy to affect his audience on their first exposure to a poem...A poet must reward the imagination of those interested in the song and engage the imagination of those who are not" (Mandel 122). The retainers of a victorious chieftain were most engaged and entertained by poetry that spoke directly to their own experience: legendary heroes, their great victories and tragic deaths, and their loyal companions. The successful *scop* acknowledged the preferences of his audience and composed and performed his works with that audience in mind (Evans 16). Knowing his audience and both crafting material for and performing to its tastes make the difference between the respected and well-rewarded *scop* in a stable professional position and a *scop* who must look out for a new posting.

6. The Individuality of a *Scop*

The personality and experiences of the *scop* filter into the stories that he tells and provide nuanced interpretations of both histories and legends. Hrothgar's *scop* in *Beowulf* directly views and takes part in the events that he later sets down in verse. The contrast of the hardships of Heorot's long ordeal at the hands of Grendel and the heroic victory of Beowulf are meticulously crafted into a song that is not begun until after the warband has viewed the field of battle. Hrothgar's *scop* thus demonstrates his professionalism by this care for veracity. Evans notes, "the telling of such events would have been better served by a poet who had witnessed them, for it provided him

¹⁹ Eliason's rather strange theory is based largely on the Beowulf and Unferth *flyting* (or *senna*) sequence in lines 499-606 (Eliason, "Pyle" 267).

²⁰ This dual role of singer and warrior finds a possible echo in the character of Volker the Fiddler in the *Nibelungenlied*, one of the most feared companions of Gunther and Hagen. In the introduction to his translation of the text, Arthur Hatto prefers to consider Volker a "gentleman amateur," but the conflation of the two skills is nonetheless interesting (Hatto 337).

with the specific details he required to fashion a more interesting and credible account” (13). He is the court poet whose repertoire is made unique by his own immediate observation of important occurrences.

The traveling entertainer in *Widsið* possesses a phenomenal memory and an extensive repertoire. From the very beginning when he “*wordhord onleac*” [unlocks his word-hoard], his words imply great treasures long stored away (line 1).²¹ Poetry and story are conflated here with “treasure-hoards,” the priceless collected treasures of dragons in Germanic legends. He offers stories of exotic foreign places and exciting foreign heroes to the shrewd patron who will reward him with gifts. His catalogue of knowledge promises a vast quantity of entertainment and enlightenment. His list of rich rewards earned suggests that the quality of his repertoire is proportionally rich. He is the itinerant storyteller, building his own unique repertoire by listening and collecting tales at every opportunity his travel provides.

The grieving, displaced poet of *Deor* departs from both the forms and the themes of his profession. He gathers together examples from across his collection of stories and legends to form a litany of misfortunes and divides it into stanzas to which he adds, in the end, an account of his own loss. Caie examines the rhetorical strategy of the poet in artistically describing his difficulties: “The effect...both highlights his problem, elevating it to epic proportions, and also puts it in perspective: if such major, world-known tragedies were resolved, so also could his” (82). He situates his predicament among some of the great if somewhat ambiguous tragedies of old.²² However, *Deor*’s autobiographical impulse is unusual among Anglo-Saxon poets.²³ Neither the composer and purveyor of second-hand tales of heroism in the manner of *Hroðgar*’s *scop*, nor the self-publicist of his own story-making prowess in the manner of *Widsið*, *Deor* becomes the tragic hero of his own story, displaced by his lord in favor of a skillful and formidable rival. Swanton argues that *Deor* “remains stoically unresentful at the fact of his displacement, acknowledging both the competence of his rival,...and the propriety of his former patron’s role” (45). His ambivalent attitude towards the situation is underlined by his repetition of the ambiguous line that ends each stanza, “*Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg,*” whose meaning seems constant but whose intention is warped by its shifting context. By the process of injecting his own experience and persona into the poem, *Deor* effectively inverts his own profession and demonstrates precisely how problematic the *scop*’s cultural status is. For all his abilities, for all his efforts at maintaining his social balance, *Deor* has failed to sufficiently please his employer. Though he speaks wistfully of the community and lord he has served, his lands and position have been reassigned. Whereas *Widsið* optimistically casts himself as a perpetual nomad, *Deor*’s newfound itinerant status throws him into despondency. He is the musing philosopher whose luck has run short but

²¹ It is interesting that this phrase is the same phrase that the *Beowulf* poet uses to describe how the hero addresses the Danish coast-guard (*Beowulf* 259).

²² Of the named characters in *Deor*’s litany, not all are passive victims of circumstance in the manner *Deor* would have his listeners believe that he is himself; particularly notable is *Weland* the Smith who extricates himself from captivity with vengeful fury against both his captor and his captor’s household.

²³ If, indeed, *Deor* is not himself a fictionalized persona. This question forms an important critical nexus for the poem, but one for a more in-depth discussion than this article.

whose repertoire is still growing by his own creative powers.

7. Observations

The Anglo-Saxon *scop*, as demonstrated in *Widsið*, *Deor*, and *Beowulf*, epitomizes the precarious pinnacle of his society. He is the noble kinsman, trusted companion, and loyal retainer of warriors and kings. He is the wise and witty entertainer of the fellowship in the mead hall. Maintaining a delicate balance among these disparate roles, he must function as teacher, as moral rudder, and as vocal conscience of the community, sometimes against his own self-interest. At the same time, he can also be experienced battle veteran, level-headed observer, impassioned mourner of glorious defeats, and celebrant of costly victories. His is the ever-present eye and creative voice salvaging the reputations of lords and rewarding the brave deeds of heroes. Judging the world around him, he decides whose feats will achieve lasting glory. Through his words, his music, and his performances, he preserves the culture and personalities of his society and of the lost peoples of legend, and when his music is silenced, joy departs from the community. Even so, the itinerant and mendicant²⁴ character of *Widsið* and the desperate if philosophical tone of *Deor* pull the observant song-making bystander into the literary action of Anglo-Saxon culture. While Hrothgar's *scop* successfully maintains his distance from the action, lending his voice but not his arm to the proceedings, *Widsið*'s apparent disinclination to settle into a community in which he would play an active role suggests a resistance to even that level of participation. At the same time, *Deor*'s lament for the loss of established position and status within a community cautions of the dearth of security within a profession so socially problematic. Thus, three literary texts, all variously featuring examples of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, demonstrate the intricacy of such participants in that society. Nevertheless, the mere longevity of these examples within Old English poetry attests to one clear fact—for his patron, his society, and himself, the *scop* truly holds the key to immortality.

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²⁴ As *Widsið*'s primary purpose in this poem seems to be self-marketing, the narrator's temporary mendicancy is strongly implied.

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