



Afterword: Performing through the Past: Ethnophilology and Oral Tradition

Author(s): Timothy R. Tangherlini

Source: *Western Folklore*, Vol. 62, No. 1/2, Models of Performance in Oral Epic, Ballad, and Song (Winter - Spring, 2003), pp. 143-149

Published by: [Western States Folklore Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1500450>

Accessed: 07/05/2013 17:34

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Western States Folklore Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Western Folklore*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

AFTERWORD

Performing through the Past

*Ethnophilology and Oral Tradition*¹

TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI

They say I'm overrated, musicians really hate it
My name is Run, I'm number one, It's very complicated
It's Tricky to rock a rhyme, to rock a rhyme that's right on time
It's Tricky . . . It's Tricky, Tricky, Tricky, Tricky

Run D.M.C.

*Vask árvakr,
bark orð saman
með málbjóns
morginverkum,
hlóðk lofköst
þanns lengi stendr
óbrotgjarn
í bragi túni.*

[So I rise up early
to erect my rhyme,
My tongue toils,
A servant at his task;
I pile the praise stones,
The poem rises,
My labour is not lost,
Long may my words live.]

*Egil Skallagrímsson*²

During the past three decades, folklorists have focused considerable attention on the study of traditional performance, proposing that an understanding of folk expressions derive in large part from an

understanding of the emergent nature of traditional expression in dynamic performative contexts (Lord 1960; Bauman 1977; Hymes 1962 and 1975; Toelken 1969). The underlying idea of what might be called a “performance centered” approach to the study of tradition is that the meanings for performer and audiences alike are created dynamically, and arise during performance. Meaning, accordingly, is contingent and neither predetermined nor absolute. The important theoretical advances in the study of traditional expression attendant this emphasis on performance have led to significant changes in the way in which we understand variation and persistence (Lord 1960; Foley 1990), and the ways in which we consider genre (Dégh 1962; Holbek 1987); they have allowed us to explore aspects of memory (Rubin 1995; Siikala 1990), and have helped us address the role of local and global political considerations that often inform traditional expression (Mills 1990; Reynolds 1995; Bendix 1997). In this model, traditional expression becomes rightfully linked to the historically situated performers and audiences—tradition does not exist outside of the tradition participants—and our studies now acknowledge more than ever the embeddedness of traditional expressions in their performative contexts.

This emphasis on performance context, however, unfortunately led some folklorists to conclude that this approach precluded the study of earlier traditional expressions since, in many cases, these early records were not linked in any way to descriptions of performance contexts, nor did there appear to be much ancillary evidence concerning the methods and contexts for performance. Furthermore the dating and provenance of these early texts was at times quite muddled. For some of these “performance oriented” scholars, everything from classical and medieval texts based in part on oral traditions through the great folklore collections of the nineteenth century became suspect. This intellectual development was somewhat surprising, since many of the early advances in the study of performance were initiated by scholars primarily interested in earlier traditions.

In addition to questions about the usefulness of earlier collections, concerns were raised about the traditional nature of many of these early texts and their relationship to oral tradition—for instance, since the only records of the presumed performances were these literary ones, did these texts truly reflect oral performance? One need only think of Saxo the Grammarian’s twelfth century rewriting of Nordic legends to recognize some of the difficulties confronting scholars of early traditions in light of the importance of performance studies. Not only did

Saxo write his chronicle of the Danes in Latin, apparently translating many of the presumably oral stories that lay behind much of the composition, but he also edited, rewrote and reorganized his materials into a more or less coherent narrative (Olrik et al. 1931–1957). Perhaps less extreme cases, such as the Icelandic sagas, the authors of which most likely relied on both written and oral sources, might be more fitting examples for an exploration of performance in medieval Scandinavia. Yet these texts as well seem to be nearly impenetrable given the extraordinary complexity of tracing sources and the highly speculative enterprise of listening for the lost echoes of long vanished voices in performance.

At first glance, the difficulties confronting medieval, classical and other historically oriented scholars for recovering lost performances seem almost overwhelming. And because of these complexities that accrue to the study of early texts, the answer to the question of whether one could explore the dynamics of folk performance in earlier cultures through the study of the textual record was apparently “no.” This unfortunate conclusion, which gained considerable acceptance among many young folklorists in the 1980s and 1990s, led to a division—at least among students and at times among their teachers—between those who emphasized texts (read the past) and those who emphasized performance (read the present and the future). The study of performance was, of course, seen to be a far sexier enterprise than the study of old manuscripts.

Yet, the state of affairs is not nearly as bleak as some may have it, and the scholars who focus primarily on texts do have an opportunity to be sexy as well. Indeed, there exist numerous possibilities for the reconstructive enterprise of tracing aspects of performance in older texts. Of course, the division between text and performance was primarily an unfortunate misunderstanding of both the study of texts and the study of performances. This hypothetical division was premised on two misleading suppositions, namely that the study of performance was not based ultimately on a study of texts (the ethnographic recording of a performance)—a position that the writings of Clifford, Marcus and others should have dispelled (1986)—and that texts do not contain hints to either their own performance or to the performance of the expressions on which the texts are based. Perhaps one of the best refutations of this latter point is Terry Gunnell’s impressive rehabilitation of Bertha Philpotts’s ideas concerning the dramatic performance of Eddic poems as scripts for monologic or dialogic theatrical performance (Gunnell

1995; Phillpotts 1920). While Gunnell's conclusions may not convince everyone, he does provide a model for using philological evidence coupled to an understanding of performance derived in large part from the study of contemporary traditions to propose a framework for the recovery of lost performances based on historical, cultural, philological and other textual evidence. This approach, dubbed "ethnopaleography" by Dennis Tedlock, ethnoarchaeology by others, and reconsidered as "ethnophilology" by Joseph Harris is one of the promising ways in which the clues of earlier performative traditions can be read through texts like the Eddic corpus (Harris, this volume).

Indeed, as the essays in this volume attest, despite the lack of clear ethnographic field data describing how, when and where something may have been performed, and despite the accretion of literary devices that would apparently reduce the discussion of medieval performance to something akin to idle speculation, a rigorous methodology can be derived that allows us to animate performances from long ago. One of the keys to this process of reanimation of the textual remnants of once vibrant traditions is a clear understanding of contemporary performances. This very type of approach informed the works of Milman Parry and Albert Lord: their earliest forays into the field, collecting the now well-known epics of Serbian and Croatian singers was motivated in part by their questions concerning Homeric epic and its performance (Lord 1960).

A similar ethnophilological approach informs many of the papers in this current volume, where explorations of contemporary performances of analogous traditions help develop an analytical matrix for the understanding of earlier texts. As Niles points out, "One has to be able to imagine a past that is not there, not only gazing at the material traces of former civilizations but also using the methods of ethnoarchaeology to make reasonable inferences regarding past cultural patterns by extrapolating from living phenomena" (Niles, this volume). For example, Reichl uses Turkic oral poetic performance as an analogous counterpart to the singing of Middle English popular romance, Toelken looks at more recent performative contexts of popular ballads for explaining ellipsis in early collected variants, while Harris rereads the eighteenth century discussions of Eddic singing, as a means to comment on a potential performative model for this verse (and a strong alternative—or perhaps copperformative mode—to the dramatic performance suggested by Gunnell 1995). By understanding the performance of analogous expressions in contemporary traditions, one can reread the earlier texts, and make surmises about the performance of these texts, which can then be

checked against other similar texts from the same or other traditions. Of course, as with archaeology, this type of ethnophilology is still speculative—but it is an informed speculation. As Martin notes in his essay, these models “do not ‘prove’ anything about the texts in question, but might provide better hypotheses” (Martin, this volume).

At the same time as we acknowledge the usefulness of illuminating earlier performances with the spotlight of contemporary traditions, it is important for us to recognize that this use of analogous traditions from different historical periods to inform our hypotheses is not a one-way street. It seems prudent to me that students of contemporary performance should also explore the findings of their more historically oriented colleagues as a means for understanding the performance of contemporary traditions. So, as an obvious example, Parry and Lord’s understanding of the Serbian and Croatian epic singers was as much informed by their explorations of the Classical epic, as their understanding of the Classical epic was informed by their explorations of the contemporary tradition. We can and must use contemporary performative traditions to understand earlier traditional performances, but at the same time we can and must use our advances in the study of earlier traditions to understand those same contemporary traditions.

While I may seem to be begging the question, the dynamics of tradition itself seem to warrant this position. Although there are great continuities in traditional expression and performance across time, there are also intriguing differences. The epigrammatic pairing of a scaldic verse and a recent rap song at the beginning of this short afterword is not solely a humorous gesture toward popular culture. Rather it seems likely that an understanding of contemporary expression may well help us hypothesize about earlier performative contexts, just as an understanding of the historical and cultural exigencies that informed the composition of a medieval poem may help inform our understanding of similar contemporary phenomena (Halama 1996). So when the rapper and the scald boast about their poetic prowess, and the difficulties of their art, they may be performing a duet across the centuries.

University of California, Los Angeles

NOTES

1. I use the term “ethnophilology” here, following the lead taken by Joseph Harris in his article included in this volume.

2. Normalized verse from Nordal 1933:267; proposed translation by Pálsson and Edwards 1976 (1982):215.

WORKS CITED

- Bauman, Richard. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, ed. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dégh, Linda. 1962. *Märchen, Erzähler und Erzählgemeinschaft; dargestellt an der ungarischen Volksüberlieferung*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Foley, John Miles. 1990. *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gunnell, Terry. 1995. *The Origins of Scandinavian Drama*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Halama, Alta Cools. 1996. Flytes of Fancy: Boasting and Boasters from Beowulf to Gangsta Rap. *Essays in Medieval Studies* 13:81–96.
- Holbek, Bengt. 1987. *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. Folklore Fellows Communications 239. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.
- Hymes, Dell. 1962. The Ethnography of Speaking. In *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, edited by T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant. Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington. Pp. 15–53.
- . 1975. Breakthrough Into Performance. In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein. The Hague & Paris: Mouton. Pp. 11–74.
- Lord, Albert. 1960. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mills, Margaret. 1990. *Oral Narrative in Afghanistan: The Individual in Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Oirik, J. et al., ed. 1931–1957. *Saxonis Gesta danorum*. Copenhagen: Hauniae, Levin & Munksgaard.
- Pálsson, Hermann and Paul Edwards, trans. 1976. Reprinted 1982. *Egil's Saga*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Phillipotts, Bertha. 1920. *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, Dwight. 1995. *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rubin, David C. 1995. *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads and Counting Out Rhymes*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sigurður Nordal, ed. 1933. *Egils saga Skallagrimmson*. Íslenzk Fornrit 2. Reykjavik: Íslenzka fornritafélag.

- Siikala, Anna-Leena. 1990. *Interpreting Oral Narrative*. Folklore Fellows Communications 245. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- Toelken, Barre. 1969. The 'Pretty Languages' of Yellowman: Genre, Mode and Texture in Navajo Coyote Narratives. *Genre* 2:211–35.