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“I CAN SING AND TELL A TALE:” PERCEPTION AND THE SELF-REFLEXIVE
NATURE OF THE OLD ENGLISH POET

A Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the English Department

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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By

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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Abstract

More than one contemporary scholar has written about the “search” for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet. They consider historical texts and poetry and every other possible place where some record of who the Anglo-Saxon *scop* may have been might be found. Some claim to recognize the Old English poet by the end of their search while others declare the entire pursuit to be futile for lack of substantial evidence. This study is somewhat of a combination of the two. Each chapter does take part in the search for the Old English poet figure, but it is not for the sake of discovering any real person or group of people. There is an unfortunate dearth of poets in historical records and very little evidence that a *scop* or oral poet position even existed. Searching for such a figure would prove to be a frustrating task indeed. Instead, this study sets out to discover the mentality of the Anglo-Saxon people in regards to the poet as a societal figure. By examining how the poet is portrayed for the Anglo-Saxons, we may come to understand who the poet was to those people: a worldly traveler who told them stories, a wise teacher who remembered their history, a talented craftsman who shared their skills. Together, these roles make up who the poet was to the people around them. Admired and respected, poets were appreciated by those for whom poetry was an essential part of life.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Old English poet is perhaps one of the most elusive figures from Anglo-Saxon history. Certainly, we know that they existed; we have a fairly large body of works that must have been composed by someone. Very little is known about the authorship of most Old English poems, though. For most, we cannot confidently name their cultural setting in any specific terms. What understanding we do have is either vague or merely supposition that is heavily debated by scholars. Such restrictions make it difficult to uncover the Old English poet figure, but perhaps by better understanding the mindset of the Anglo-Saxon people, we may also determine who the poet was to them.

1.1 Poetry vs. Singing

In order to consider Old English poetry and poets with any amount of clarity, it is important first to understand what I mean when I say Old English poetry or Old English poet. Thornbury offers a thorough examination of the latter in the first chapter of her book *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England*. She examines various words for poets in Old English and all of their implications and shows that the question of what a poet was is too complicated to have a single answer. For her study, Thornbury chooses to use the word poet broadly as a label for anyone who did or might have composed verse, though she admits that “some of the poets in the following chapters, in other words, would certainly not have been called poets by their contemporaries” (36). I am more concerned with those who would have been considered poets by their contemporary societies.

Therefore, aside from when I discuss the author of any given poem (i.e. the *Beowulf* poet), I refer only to those who performed orally as poets.

Naturally, I then refer to any oral performance or recitation of verse as poetry. Essentially, my designating poetry in such a way is both broader and more specific than how we view poetry in modern society, but that makes it more similar to how the concept would have been received by the Anglo-Saxons. In the introduction to *A History of Old English Literature*, Fulk and Cain make a similar point about how oral literature differs from the modern concept of performative mediums. They suggest that “although we tend to speak of modern poetry as having been “written” (i.e. composed) and of being “read,” these terms must usually be avoided in regard to Old English poetry, as they impose a modern model of production and reception that distorts our understanding of early medieval conditions” (29). Since this point offers a good idea of what Old English poetry was not (at least in comparison to what poetry is considered today), it also provides us with some idea of what poetry was, specifically that it was composed, performed, and received orally. Fulk and Cain go on to mention that “even the term ‘poems,’ though not yet stigmatized in Old English literary criticism, is prejudicial, as it seems that all such compositions were sung, or capable of being sung, to the accompaniment of a single stringed instrument, a lyre or harp (see Boenig 1996); and ‘poem’ and ‘song,’ though perhaps undifferentiated for Anglo-Saxons, have very different connotations for us” (29). Since much of this project is about trying to understand the mindset of the Anglo-Saxon people better, I will treat such terms and concepts how they might have been treated by

the Anglo-Saxons. The words “poem” and “song” as well as any of their variants will be used interchangeably, along with “performance” and its variants.

1.2 Historical Accounts of Oral Poetry in Anglo-Saxon England

Astonishingly little is written about oral poetry in Anglo-Saxon England, especially when we consider the vast records that exist for other medieval Germanic societies. In the case of Anglo-Saxon historical texts (most of which were written in Latin), mentions of singing or oral poets are quite brief and scattered throughout different writings. Some instances of documented poetry show composition, others of oral performance, very few of the two simultaneously. There is no complete record or extensive explanation of the custom of oral poetry in Anglo-Saxon England anywhere in any historical record. Rather, we must examine different bits and pieces of historical records in order to discover the place of poetry and poets in Anglo-Saxon society.

1.2.1 *Tacitus and the Function of Oral Performance*

Part of understanding the place of poetry within society is understanding what its function was. One possible use of oral performance is indicated in Tacitus’s *Germania*, which is often thought to serve as a valuable source for knowledge of Anglo-Saxon culture. Though the text is inconsistent with other historical records and not extremely reliable as a history, Fulk and Cain use the text in comparison with the Old English poem *Beowulf* to show that there is little difference between the world that Tacitus describes and that which is shown in Old English heroic verse. Despite the clear differences

between those worlds and the world of Anglo-Saxon England at the time when the manuscript was copied (around 1000), Fulk and Cain maintain that “several aspects of the Germanic society that Tacitus describes continue to be relevant in the Anglo-Saxon world, albeit in altered form” (4).

One aspect that Tacitus mentions is the use of songs as records of Germanic legend. Two brief mentions make up the entirety of what Tacitus says about oral poetry, but both are quite indicative of the function of singing within society. The first is in the second chapter, where Tacitus claims that “the traditional songs [form] their only record of the past” (102). He says this while introducing a story about “an earth-born god” (102). Tacitus’s following chapter, then, begins by relating that the Germans would sing about the hero Hercules whenever they were about to engage in battle. Together, these two accounts emphasize heroic legend and its use in recording history. Fulk and Cain highlight the former of these points when discussing the mismatching of genre within some collections: “given the way that heroic vocabulary permeates all Old English poetic genres, including such unheroic compositions as riddles, prayers, allegories, and homiletic pieces, heroic verse must at least have dominated the poetic repertoire in the days before the Conversion” (28). Their point is that despite the seemingly randomness of the organization of some manuscripts, all Old English poems share subject matter inspiration.

The second point illustrated by Tacitus is that the performance of these heroic myths was a means of recording the past. However, the only instance of actual performance (or at least indication of it) within the *Germania* is just before battle: “the

Germans, like many other peoples, are said to have been visited by Hercules, and they sing of him as the foremost of all the heroes when they are about to engage in battle.” It seems a bit odd that the people would sing about the past in such a setting. Surely it was not done to teach the history or pass it down.¹ This begs the question of the point of oral poetry. If it was not a record of history for the sake of recording history, then what was its purpose? The obvious answer from the scene in the *Germania* is that poetry helped prepare men for battle. Such a notion is further hinted at in the note Tacitus includes directly after the above sentence:

They also have the well-known kind of chant that they call *baritus*. By the rendering of this they not only kindle their courage, but, merely by listening to the sound, they can forecast the issue of an approaching engagement. For they either terrify their foes or themselves become frightened, according to the character of the noise they make upon the battlefield; and they regard it not merely as so many voices chanting together but as a unison of valour. What they particularly aim at is a harsh, intermittent roar; and they hold their shields in front of their mouths, so that the sound is amplified into a deeper crescendo by the reverberation. (103)

The placement of the note suggests that these chants work in conjunction with the reciting of heroic legends to ready the men before a fight. Of course, singing is not the best scare tactic, so it is likely that the myths of Hercules and other heroes were sang before the harsh roaring began. It is possible, though, that the heroic poetry assisted with the first of the two uses Tacitus names for the *baritus*: kindling courage. The heroes that were sang about were, of course, courageous in battle. Therefore, such stories were likely meant to ignite the same attitude in their audience. One way that the stories might have

¹ This implies that these songs must have been performed at other times as well despite there being no mention of it in the text.

accomplished such a feat was to offer motivation. The subjects of heroic poetry became so because of their great feats as warriors. Hearing the stories of such heroes just before battle would remind the men that if they were as courageous and bold, they might one day be remembered in that way, too.

1.2.2 *Poetry as Entertainment*

Of course, poetry was not only performed just before battle. Another, more documented, function of poetry was entertainment. Several Anglo-Saxon records include some mention of singing during feasting or celebration. One such example can be found in the Venerable Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* during his account of Cædmon, who will be discussed further in the next section. Early in the story, Bede describes a scene of performance as he relates Cædmon's dislike of singing: "hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he [Cædmon] saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of feasting, go out, and return home" (215). This description is not only evident of what the purpose of the performing was but also suggestive of how such performances might have taken place. In this scene, there doesn't seem to be one specific poet but instead, everyone takes place in performing for entertainment. The people pass around an instrument and take turns singing. Apparently, everyone present was expected to participate since Cædmon had to leave in order to avoid his turn. However, this account does not offer any information about the songs performed. Did each person sing a different song or did the group perform one extended song that everyone knew? Did

they compose as they sang or attempt to recite an existing song? Such details are not included in Bede's story, nor can they be found in any other historical text. What is clear from comparing this example to Tacitus's or any other mention of performance is that poetry did not have a single function, and it did not look the same in every situation. Certainly, the warriors about to fight did not pass around a harp as they sang just as those at a feast surely did not roar and chant after a song. Poetry as an art form was quite versatile, and we must assume its authors were, too. Therefore, no one example or view of the poet is enough to show who Old English poets were.

1.3 Named Old English Poets

Unfortunately, there is very little evidence for actual Old English poets. In fact, there are only a dozen or so named Old English poets in medieval manuscripts, several of whom we now know to be spurious and several more who we have only tenuous evidence for. A list of twelve named Anglo-Saxon poets has been comprised by O'Donnell: "Æduwen, Aldhelm, Alfred the Great, Anlaf, Baldulf, Bede, Cædmon, Cnut, Cynewulf, Dunstan, Hereward and Wulfstan (or perhaps Wulfsige)" (13).² The majority of these names' earliest record comes from twelfth century historical texts, two of which were written by William of Malmesbury, the foremost historian of the age. In his *Gesta regum Anglorum*, William offers a few stories that involve unnamed singers or instances of oral performance. He also names Alfred and Anlaf and claims both disguised as

² O'Donnell notes that "no specific study for the named poets in Anglo-Saxon England seems to exist. This list has been compiled from material in Frank 1993, especially 29-31, and nn. 100 and 101; Opland 1980; Robinson 1990, 61; and Sisam 1953, 225-231" (13).

minstrels in order to spy on the opposing side's camp. There is no other evidence for the latter of these two performing orally. William's ecclesiastical history, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, then, praises the poetry of Aldhelm and includes scenes of him performing secular songs. No existing poems can be certainly attributed to him, though, and there is no other record of Aldhelm as poet despite his appearance in other histories.

Balduf is a vernacular poet from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, but no other trace of him exists. Cnut, a known king of the Anglo-Saxons, is shown composing an English ballad in the *Liber Eliensis*. However, as noted by O'Donnell, "the text this source attributes to him is not in a recognizable Old English metre and seems unlikely to have been composed by him (see Opland 1980, 188-189)" (13). There is also no other record of Cnut as a poet. Eadmer's biography *Vita sancti Dunstani* includes a single scene of Dunstan singing in English, and the *Gesta Herewardi* once describes the outlaw Hereward as a singer. It should be obvious from the established pattern that no other record of these two as oral performers exists. Æduwen, though, is even less certain than any of these very tenuous examples (which does not include Alfred who will be discussed further). Her name appears on the inscription of a brooch that was discovered on the Isle of Ely. According to O'Donnell, the inscription identifies Æduwen "as the ornament's owner in a way that suggests she might have also composed the inscription" (14). However, since even O'Donnell seems uncertain of the validity of his claim, it seems rather presumptuous to list her as a possible named poet.

Some names on the list, though, do have a historical record of their relationship to poetry. Wulfstan was undoubtedly a poet of some renown, though it is less certain that he

ever composed in Old English. All of his surviving works as well as any thought to be written by him are in Anglo-Latin. Bede and King Alfred both wrote in Old English, but the only surviving vernacular verse credited to either is rather contentious. The five-line poem often called *Bede's Death Song* is thought by some to be the scholar's final words. A letter from Cuthbert to Cuthwin relates Bede's final days and includes the poem. However, *Bede's Death Song* is the most widely copied Old English poem, appearing in over 40 manuscripts, only some of which name Bede as the author.³ Alfred is also sometimes considered the author of vernacular verse, but that is also contested. The works that have been accredited to him include the metrical prefaces to his translations of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* as well as some of the metrical psalms. However, each of these authorships has been questioned and none have been proven to be composed by Alfred with any amount of certainty.⁴

Cynewulf, on the other hand, has several vernacular poems accredited to him. Four surviving Old English poems include his runic signature: *Christ II*, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and *Elene*. Several other poems were assigned to him in the late nineteenth century, but most are now confidently refuted.⁵ The one still regularly debated is Guthlac B, which only survives without its ending (and possible runic signature).⁶ Still, more than one Old English poem can be confidently attributed to Cynewulf. What is lacking is any sure record of who Cynewulf was. In his introduction to his translations of

³ Those that do name Bede tend to be of later origin than those that do not.

⁴ See Treschow, et al.

⁵ Along with the four poems with his signature, *Guthlac A*, *Guthlac B*, *Christ I*, *Christ III*, *The Panther*, *The Whale*, *The Partridge*, *the Phoenix*, *Andreas*, and *The Dream of the Rood* were all once thought to be written by Cynewulf.

⁶ See Bjork 2013.

Cynewulf's poems, Bjork discusses the mystery of the author and lists several possibilities of who he might have been. He later concludes that "the puzzle of Cynewulf, then, remains unsolved, and identifying him lies beyond our abilities at the moment and may forever do so" (x).

Therefore, we are left with only one named poet for whom we have both biographical information and surviving vernacular verse: Cædmon. The story of Cædmon is recorded in Book IV, chapter 24 of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. According to Bede, Cædmon was a simple herdsman who did not know how to sing. One night, he was given the gift of poetry during a dream with the condition that he must use it for God's purpose. Once he awoke, he was able "to compose godly and religious songs; thus, whatever he learned from the old Scriptures by means of interpreters, he quickly turned into extremely delightful and moving poetry, in English, which was his own tongue" (215). The only work of Cædmon's that survives is the nine-line poem he supposedly composed during his dream, which he remembered and related the following day so it could be recorded. The poem was summarized by Bede within his *Historia ecclesiastica*, which contains the only surviving evidence of the man or his poetry. Still, the record exists, and there is no evidence to suggest the existence of Cædmon might be false. Since Cædmon gave up his secular life after his dream, he was not a poet in the sense of being a singer or performer. However, he did compose and relate all of his works orally, so in that sense, he certainly was an oral poet.

1.4 The Poet as a Literary Character

As the examples I have given show, the information given about poetry and poets in historical records is tenuous at best. No account is clear about how poetry worked or exhaustive in showing its different functions. The historical information we have about Old English poets is even more inadequate. Cædmon is the only poet we can safely assume composed vernacular verse, but even he was not a performer. So, who was? Since that question cannot be answered by looking at historical texts, we must instead turn to fiction to find the Old English oral poet.

The first chapter of this work introduces the notion that some amount of historical information can be gleaned from fiction, which for the Anglo-Saxons, means poetry. Certainly, we cannot necessarily assume that any fictional character resembles someone from Anglo-Saxon society, but the commonalities between different portrayals of the same role do offer some idea of how that role was perceived by the Anglo-Saxons. Perception, then, plays an important role in our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon people. Fulk and Cain have made the point that all Old English poems were popular literature “since only performed songs could be learned and transmitted: a song that ceased to be performed ceased to exist” (28). Therefore, the way poets are described as characters in poetry shows what were popular views of them. By examining poet characters, we can begin to understand how poets were perceived by actual Anglo-Society. Of course, true Anglo-Saxon poets may not have resembled their audiences’ perceptions of them, but understanding that perception does allow us to understand the Anglo-Saxon people better. To show how this practice works, I apply it to the portrayals of the poet in the poem

Beowulf. Since it includes several scenes with a poet figure and describes both qualities of the poet as well as the role of the poet, *Beowulf* is perhaps the best complete image of who the poet might have been. Therefore, it works as a good starting point when comparing different views and depictions of poet characters.

The purpose of chapter 2, then, is to create an amalgamation of many different views of the poet by examining various poet characters. In order to get different perspectives, I use poems of different genres with different types of representation. Since *Beowulf* has a specific third-person character, chapter 2 discusses impersonal third-person representations of poet figures. Such characters are unnamed and usually quite vague in terms of identification. This allows for us to see what features of the poet are universal and applicable to any oral poet. When a poet is described for what they do rather than who they are, their identity as a poet is emphasized, which then makes that identity clearer to us. First-person representation, then, offers a more specific depiction. Similar to the character in *Beowulf*, narrator poet characters who tell their story in the first person usually offer a name and setting. However, the self-reflexive nature of such poems allows for a deeper understanding of the connections between the narrator poet characters and the actual poets who composed them.

Ultimately, no one view, portrayal, or historical account is sufficient in showing who the Old English poet was. Because of the inadequate amount of historical records for Old English poets, we are left to discover the poet within the descriptions in Old English poems. However, such a method only works when multiple poems depict the poet comparably. With enough overlap between poems, we may conceivably conflate various

images of the poet to illustrate how the Old English oral poet was perceived by Anglo-Saxon society.

Chapter 2

Societal Perception and How it Applies to the Oral Poet Character in *Beowulf*

As a genre, historical fiction is somewhat of a paradoxical label. In fact, the second meaning of “historical” according to the OED is explicitly opposite of fiction: “belonging to or of the nature of history as opposed to fiction or legend.” Certainly, something cannot both oppose fiction and be it. Yet, somehow, that is exactly what historical fiction attempts to do. It blends two things that are, by nature, completely opposite. As is true with any type of amalgamation, something of each original component must be present in the final product. Often, we think of a true blending as one that combines multiple elements equally, but historical fiction is purposefully disproportionate. Britannica defines a historical novel as one “that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact.” This definition could apply to any historical writing as easily as it does the novel, and it illustrates the expectation we have as a society that historical writing should be as realistic and faithful to true history as possible. In this case, we want and expect the historical aspect of the compound concept to outweigh the fiction part or, as the above definition implies, at least to appear so. This distinction then begs the questions of how and why true and apparent fidelity might differ.

To answer such a question, we must first consider the implications behind the phrase apparent fidelity. How can something appear to be faithful to historical fact without actually being faithful to historical fact? The obvious answer is to question the

historical fact. If I were to research American life in the 1820s and then write about it, I would be offering my own perception of American life in the 1820s more than true history. No matter how many historical records or memoirs or biographies I read, there is no possible way for me to understand true life two centuries ago. However, since I would be writing for an audience with access to the same knowledge and resources as me, it would not matter if my interpretation was accurate or not. Either way, it would appear accurate to a contemporary audience. In this sense, realistic detail is not about what actually took place in history but how any given audience might perceive a historical culture. Historical fiction, therefore, often reveals just as much about the society of its contemporary audience and their perception as it does about history.

Consequently, when considering works from the past, historical fiction can offer insight into two different historical cultures: that of the subject cultural setting and that of the cultural setting in which it was written. While this phenomenon applies to many Old English poems, none illustrate it quite as well as *Beowulf*. Perhaps not the most discussed question surrounding the poem but certainly one of some dispute is how accurate the poem is at illustrating culture and society. R.D. Fulk claims that some of the value of the poem comes from “its information about Anglo-Saxon heroic culture and early Scandinavian history,” but he is not clear about what that information is. He does, however, seem to understand the impossibility of answering with certainty any question about the milieu of the poem or of being able to prove any interpretations no matter how educated they may be: “there is little agreement among literary scholars about the cultural context in which the poem was produced, simply because it is impossible to prove

conclusively when and where the poem was composed, except within very broad limits” (xiv). Despite this limitation, many scholars have still considered the cultural context of *Beowulf* and how it might indicate the accuracy of the cultural aspects within the poem.

Of course, it is unlikely that the *Beowulf* poet intended to portray their⁷ own cultural society, whatever it may have been. The broad limits we can give to the setting in which the poem was composed at least confirms that the poem is what we might call historical fiction. We do not know how far removed the poet was from the society they wrote about, but we do know that they could not have experienced the society and culture that existed during the time *Beowulf* is about, which then makes the entire question of accuracy quite a bit more complicated. It is nearly impossible that the *Beowulf* poet was able to present the societal culture of the subject setting of the poem perfectly, but the poem could be an accurate representation of how the author’s contemporary society viewed ancient Scandinavian culture. However, the poem could mimic the *Beowulf* poet’s own society instead. In that case, determining accuracy is nearly impossible as we do not know the cultural setting in which *Beowulf* was written. Ultimately, it does not matter. Whether or not the society illustrated in *Beowulf* is a true depiction of antiquated cultures does not affect the importance of the poem as a source for historical culture because the poem does, at the very least, show us how certain aspects of society, including the role of the oral poet, were perceived by its contemporary audience.

⁷ Because there is no way of knowing the gender of the *Beowulf* poet and most poet figures mentioned in Old English literature, I refer to the poet as a singular “they.” I will do the same for any poet or poet figure not explicitly identified.

2.1 Historical Culture and the Importance of Perception

While I am primarily concerned with the portrayal of the poet figure, it is necessary first to understand the relationship between Old English poetry and societal culture in general. Of the more contemporary scholarship surrounding this topic, Roberta Frank's arguments against the accuracy of society in Old English poetry are likely the most discussed with agreement and contention applied in near equal measure. Though she has written on similar topics several times since, Frank's 1982 essay, "The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History," remains one of the most applicable to this poem in particular. In the beginning of the essay, Frank actually praises the *Beowulf* poet for "avoid[ing] obvious anachronisms and present[ing] such an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around A.D. 500 that his illusion of historical truth has been taken for reality" (54).⁸ In fact, Frank's main argument against the accuracy of *Beowulf* has nothing to do with how it illustrates society but rather the *Beowulf* poet's attitude and treatment of certain ideals and how the poem "is filled with oddly advanced notions" such as the how the poet seems to praise Pagan ideals and practices (57).⁹ According to Frank, those notions and ideals in regards to religion and the treatment of antiquated cultural values are projected onto the Scandinavian society in order to show a celebration of values rather than realism.

⁸ See Fulk for further discussion of the "quasi-historical events, individuals, and peoples" mentioned in *Beowulf*.

⁹ Frank says this in regard to the dating of the poem. According to Frank, the *Beowulf* poet's treatment of Pagan culture and values is advanced for an early dating of the poem. Frank uses this point as evidence for a later dating.

Some scholars accept Frank's arguments easily. In her essay about the relationship between the heroic character of Beowulf and the setting in which the poem takes place, Haruko Momma echoes Frank by saying, "the Scandinavian society depicted by the *Beowulf* poet is so realistic that it is often taken for an authentic reconstruction of the northern heroic age" (164). However, she immediately dismisses the notion with, "but Frank has demonstrated that the world of *Beowulf*, despite its historical depth and geographical breadth, is no more than a verisimilitude crafted by the poet with his 'chronological acrobatics and fascination with cultural diversity'¹⁰" (164). Momma does not offer any further evidence to this claim as she seems to believe Frank's assessment without question. Other scholars, however, are not quite so easily convinced, and several scholars have written in direct response and disagreement to a variety of Frank's claims.¹¹

For my purposes, it matters little whether or not Frank's assessment of the *Beowulf* poet is correct. How society is portrayed in literature can tell us just as much about a culture as true history can though, of course, the two do not tell us the same things. The figure of the Old English poet and their role in society is no different. In fact, how the Old English oral poet is depicted in poetry may be considered more valuable to cultural knowledge than what true history we have because of the limited evidence of that history. As the introduction shows, there are only a handful of Anglo-Saxon poets who are identified in medieval manuscripts. Of those, Cædmon is the only one with surviving biographical information known for composing vernacular verse, but even he has no

¹⁰ From 'The Beowulf Poet's Sense of History,' in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*.

¹¹ Shippey's essay surveys a number of articles that discuss these claims.

record of the type of oral performance we might expect from an Anglo-Saxon poet. There is mention in his story of singing as a form of entertainment at feasts, but Cædmon leaves early, depriving us of experiencing the performances.¹² Bede's account does also suggest that Cædmon orally composed songs from the histories read to him, but he does so on his own. He then recites his verses later so that they can be recorded. He does not, however, perform orally for the sake of entertainment. Of course, we could still consider Cædmon as a model for the Old English poet figure, but with the records of other poets being so few and those few being incomplete, there is little to compare him against. One account alone is not enough to determine the unifying characteristics of a societal role. In her 1993 article, "The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet," Frank points out that many conjectures and assumptions have been made about Anglo-Saxon singers, several of which she lists and describes as being considered "standard fare" right before she declares them "no more than hopeful speculations hallowed by repetition" (12). She even goes so far as to suggest the possibility that Anglo-Saxon oral poets never actually existed since "nothing can be proven" unlike the oral poets from other Germanic societies¹³ who have been recorded as "holding a publicly recognized office" (12). Her point is not completely untenable though it is perhaps a bit extreme. Although we usually assume such a figure must have existed in Anglo-Saxon society, there is a distinct lack of historical evidence to prove it. Daniel Donohue discusses the situation briefly in the introduction of *How the Anglo-Saxons Read Their Poems*. He states that "although the

¹² The story of Cædmon is from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, IV:24 and is discussed in more detail in the introduction.

¹³ Frank names medieval Ireland, Wales, and Scotland as well as medieval Scandinavia.

evidence is necessarily indirect, reciting and listening to poems must have been a common activity throughout the lifetimes of individual Anglo-Saxons” (6). As he points out, there is sufficient evidence that oral poetry existed in Anglo-Saxon society. It is just indirect rather than historical. Therefore, we must look to poetry in order to find the poet character.

According to Frank, most of our knowledge of the Old English oral poet comes from three poems: *Beowulf*, *Deor*, and *Widsith*.¹⁴ However, the poet figures in these poems are not necessarily Anglo-Saxon poets, with the poet figure in *Beowulf* being the obvious example. As Frank puts it, the depiction of an oral poet in several different scenes in *Beowulf* “indicates only that the author, in whatever century he lived, believed that ancient Danes were likely to behave that way, not that song was his own medium of exchange” (28). Frank is not wrong. The depiction of the oral poets in *Beowulf* does not prove anything about actual Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian performers. However, this does not mean that we should dismiss the scenes altogether as Frank does by comparing their reception to that of cartoons. Perception may not be the same as reality, but it still holds importance when discussing culture. Understanding a society’s attitude toward something says much about that society’s cultural values.

Perhaps the most applicable article to my discussion is John D. Niles’s “The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet,” which is in direct response to Frank’s article “The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet.” Niles calls for the search to be reopened for two reasons:

¹⁴ I agree that these three poems all provide valuable insight into the poet character, but I would not limit it to only these three. Many Old English poems illustrate a poet figure, several of which will be discussed in the next chapter, including the latter two of these.

one, that Frank avoids any discussion of opinions about the nature of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet and two, that “the figure of the scop (that is, the early Germanic court singer) loomed large in the imagination of the Anglo-Saxons themselves” (11). It is this second reason that I am primarily concerned with as Niles points to *Beowulf* as “the text that comes first to mind in this regard” (11). He discusses the scene that takes place as several men ride back to Heorot after going to see the remains of Grendel when one of the men begins to sing about Beowulf’s triumph the night before. Niles points out the connection between this scene and oral composition theory and concludes that the poet must have been “familiar with a model of oral-formulaic improvisation” because of how quickly they are able to compose a song about a recent event (12).

While I agree with the assessment that the poet must be improvising to some extent, Niles seems to ignore any lapse of time with his assertion. His main evidence for his argument is “the fact that this scene is said to transpire during the early morning hours after the hero’s triumph in Heorot” (12). I have two issues with this statement. The first is the added emphasis with the adjective early. Nowhere in the text is such an implication made clear. *Morgen*¹⁵ just means morning or even the next day. It does not suggest earliness by any means. My second issue with Niles’s statement, is that time clearly passes between the “in the morning” statement and when the poet begins to sing about Beowulf. The poem is not clear exactly about how much time has passed, but it is clear that it has happened. The section begins with the men traveling to Grendel’s lair, and

¹⁵ Niles seems to make his conjecture based on the beginning of the section, which starts on line 837 with the phrase *ða wæs on morgen*.

some are said to have journeyed *geond wīdwegas* or “across long distances”¹⁶ (840). The scene with the poet then happens on their return trip, clearly indicating some amount of time having passed. So, Niles’s supposition about the timeline may not be without fault, but that is not reason enough to dismiss the entire passage from attention as Niles assumes Frank would. According to Niles, Frank would argue that the Beowulf poet is only “evoking an imagined past” rather than “depicting contemporary reality” (12). I agree that Frank has made her opinions clear and does not believe that portrayals of the poet are in any way accurate. I do not agree with Frank’s position, but as I stated before, it does not really matter if the poet characters are true to contemporary standards or completely imagined. Even fictionalized societies are able to offer some information about true cultural values. Frank disagrees, a point that Niles summarizes by ventriloquizing her dismissal of scenes like the one he discusses: “such fictions have no historical value, and so they are ruled out of court when what is looked for is credible evidence of how actual Anglo-Saxon poets composed their works” (12). Niles’s argument aligns more with my own. He points out that even if the illustration of the poet is not factual, it still “contribute[s] to the history of mentality” (12). This idea resembles my own about perception. However, I would add to Niles’s point by arguing that understanding the mentality of the Anglo-Saxon people must then lead to some understanding of their culture if not in its reality within society, then in its value and ideal by the Anglo-Saxon people.

¹⁶ Translations of *Beowulf* are from Fulk 2010.

The same could be said for any aspect of culture portrayed in literature, fiction or otherwise. Even fantasy offers some insight into cultural perception. One example is the perception of any given fictional creature. Consider the figure of the vampire. It has been portrayed in English literature many different ways over the span of two hundred years.¹⁷ Even in the past few decades the depiction of vampire characters has varied greatly in popular literature and other media forms, but some characteristics are almost always present: pointed teeth (fangs), blood-drinking, living dead, immortality, etc. These consistencies do not offer any evidence for who or what vampires actually are because they do not actually exist. Instead, how vampires are often depicted in literature tells us how society perceives them. Some qualities have survived the centuries (pale skin, attractiveness) while others have faded into vague familiarity (ability to transform into a wolf). This sort of societal perception offers valuable information about today's society. It says nothing about true history, but it does tell us what ideals are valued by modern culture.¹⁸ This type of perceptual understanding also works with true aspects of society. The commonalities among how any given role in society is portrayed in modern media show how society perceives that role. Take the role of the teacher, for example. Many works of literature or other media forms include similarities when describing a teacher character. Often, teachers are illustrated as uncaring, imperious, and egotistical. One of the most common sayings about teachers, which is attributed to George Bernard Shaw, is

¹⁷ As I am considering only English literature, the time span refers to John Polidori's "The Vampyre" as the first instance of a vampire character.

¹⁸ Often, it is the physical qualities that are shared between different illustrations of vampires: speed, strength, pale skin, pointed teeth. Many vampire figures also possess special abilities, the most common of which is mind control or the ability to bend someone else's will to their own.

“he who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.” This aphorism adds to the negativity of our society’s view of teachers and offers a reasonable explanation as to why they might feel underappreciated (which is another stereotype of teachers). Of course, not all teachers share these traits nor do all teacher characters. In fact, it is highly unlikely than many actual teachers fit the description I have given. Yet, those qualities would not seem out-of-place in most teacher characters. Therefore, it is the perception of our modern society that such depictions show rather than truth. In reality, it is impossible to label any profession or group of people with shared personality traits accurately since such stereotypes do not necessarily reflect the truth.

The same sort of perceptual understanding can be found in Old English poetry. For the poet character, we might consider a couple of the most common qualities used in Old English poems: having a good memory and being skilled with words. Now, it is possible that actual Anglo-Saxon *scops* often had these attributes. However, as the example with the teacher shows, it is also possible that oral poets were not at all similar to how they were perceived by society. That perception, of course, must come from somewhere, but it would be very difficult to surmise where that might be. Even now, I cannot say with any assurance where the stereotypes of teachers come from despite it being an aspect of my own society. Attempting to find the origin of Anglo-Saxon perception would only prove even more of an impossibility. However, recognizing how the Anglo-Saxons perceived the poet or *scop* figure does allow us to know something about the true *scop* figure, but we can only guess what exactly the connection between the two is.

2.2 Historical Fiction and Society

The topic of how *Beowulf* illustrates society is a rather common one, and much has been said about it.¹⁹ Possibly the most complete discussion of society portrayal in *Beowulf* can be found in John M. Hill's "Social Milieu." The essay begins by listing dozens of scholarly opinions about "various Germanic social customs, values, and structures found in *Beowulf*" (255). Hill does so not to argue against what others have said but to discuss several different aspects of the poem that are normally considered in isolation from each other. He points out that "early in this [the twentieth] century, a number of anthropologically informed scholars used heroic poems as evidence for early Germanic social life" but argues that we should instead "think of *Beowulf* as an integrated social world dramatized by the poet" (258-59).²⁰ Hill discusses several different aspects of social life that are illustrated in the poem including a brief discussion of how the *Beowulf* poet uses the poetry scenes to look back on the past. His point is to show the fluidity of social structures.

From the concept and performance of gift-giving to the social relationships between characters, no single set of ideals is encompassed by the poem. Instead, Hill argues that the poem works "as an idealized incorporation of past and present, of noble behavior then and now – all projected large in both good and inverted or evil manifestations" (268). This claim is vague enough that it would be difficult to argue against, but it does not offer any specific view of the poet. Though he relates and

¹⁹ See for example Naismith, Momma, or any of the sources listed by Hill.

²⁰ Hill discusses this concept further in *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf: Arrivals and Departures*.

examines many social concepts that are discussed or illustrated in *Beowulf*, Hill does not discuss the poet as a member of society. Still, Hill's point that the possibility of a dynamic social structure is present shows how the poem can offer information about history. If we limit the poem to representing only one societal behavior,²¹ we restrict any possibility that the poem has of providing historical insight.

2.3 Representation of the Poet in Poetry

One of the most available sources for representation of the oral poet is poetry written in the oral tradition. This is true for more than just Germanic alliterative poetry. The *Odyssey* contains one of the earliest depictions of an oral poet. In Book 8 when the king Alcinous gives a list of commands, one is to summon his singer:

“... Call in the inspired bard
Demodocus. God has given the man the gift of song,
to him beyond all other, the power to please,
however the spirit stirs him on to sing.” (50-53)²²

These lines provide a somewhat vague and unspecific picture of the oral poet. It is, perhaps, a bit pretentious, but it is not uncommon for the skill of oral poets to be somewhat exaggerated. If the name were not present, this description could easily be used for any oral performer. There is nothing in it that is particularly telling about Ancient Greek bards nor anything that might differentiate them from any other oral poets.

²¹ Hill is mainly concerned with time (past and present), but the same concept applies to the variations between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon societies.

²² Translation by Robert Fagles.

My point in highlighting the lack of distinction in this description of Demodocus is to show that all oral performers share some qualities. Even singers or songwriters in present-day society could be said to be “inspired” or to have “the gift of song.” These qualities do not make the poet any more unique than the occurrence of a bard performing in a king’s court.

However, there are some aspects of this bard and his performance that do specifically signify the society and culture of Ancient Greece. The most obvious indication of Ancient Greek culture is the mention of gods and goddesses. As Demodocus is further described, he is said to have been given his talents by the goddess Muse. However, her gifts to him were not all good. She made him blind as well as gave him the highest skill in the art of singing. Being favored by a goddess is enough to signify Demodocus as a character from Ancient Greece, but the conflicting nature of her gifts is also a common trope in Ancient Greek literature. The gods who show partiality to mortals give them grief as often as favor, and their gifts are usually as much a curse as a blessing. Cassandra was given the gift of prophesy by Apollo but also cursed never to be believed. Achilles was forced to choose between a short but glorious life or a long but obscure one. Greatness always comes with a price, a theme illustrated often in Ancient Greek literature, and its use in the depiction of Demodocus is a good signifier that the character represents Ancient Greek culture.

The two points I have made about Demodocus as a representation of an oral poet may seem rather contradictory. However, both are relevant. Demodocus’ description is both vague and specific. This signifies that while all oral performers do share some

(usually inherent) qualities, they also vary according to the societal culture they represent. Similar examples can be found for other cultures and time periods. Old English poetry contains many characterizations or descriptions of a poet figure. Some are like the one above from *The Odyssey*: a scene where a poet performs in court.²³ Others only speak of the poet as an entity rather than a concrete character. Sometimes the poet is mentioned briefly; other times they are described at length. Some poems speak of an occurrence of reciting poetry in the first person as though it is a memory that the narrator has lived. Some narrators describe the poet in the third person as though speaking about another poet, someone other than themselves. Often, different portrayals of the poet figure share characteristics and qualities, but some show distinctive aspects, as well.²⁴

The one thing that all the poet figures described in poetry have in common is that they are literary characters. It is true that Old English poetry often seems to portray authentic Anglo-Saxon society, but it is also true that certain aspects of that society are sometimes embellished, possibly to the point of being fantastical or unrealistic. This is even more true for portrayals of characters. Warriors and heroes are not as interesting and entertaining if they are comparable to average men. Yet even when everything and everyone is illustrated realistically, it can be difficult to determine the accuracy of any particular depiction given in an Old English poem. Even if we could know for certain that

²³ The Old English example most similar to the scene in *The Odyssey* is the scene in *Beowulf* that introduces the poet Healgamen (lines 1063-70).

²⁴ This is true for all depictions of the oral poet not just those in Old English poetry. However, the possible presentations listed here were done so with specific examples from Old English poems in mind. That is not to say that similar variation could not be found in other types of literature, though, as the above example from an Ancient Greek epic shows.

there is some truth to every story told in poetry,²⁵ there is no way to know where that truth lies. Despite all of these complications, Old English poetry remains one of the few (somewhat) reliable sources that we have for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet. Whether or not the poet figure displayed in Old English poetry was akin to actual poets is a question with no easy answer. However, even if the actual poets were nothing like those presented in poems, the consistency of the poet figure throughout Old English poetry at least provides some idea of the perception of the poet by an Anglo-Saxon audience, and perception is always (to some extent) rooted in reality.

2.4 *Beowulf's* Depiction of the Poet

Perhaps the most obvious or at least the most recognized instance of the poet as a character is in *Beowulf*. On its own, the poem offers a fairly complete image of the oral poet since it includes multiple scenes with a poet character and describes the poet's qualities as well as their role within society. As one of the earliest surviving Anglo-Saxon poems,²⁶ *Beowulf* is often considered one of the most valued pieces of Old English literature. It is also the most discussed and debated Old English poem, often garnering much contention among scholars, which is likely, in part, because much of the evidence surrounding the poem must come from analysis and conjecture.²⁷ In his essay "*Beowulf*, Truth, and Meaning," John D. Niles reminds us that "in a realm so far removed from the poem's original context, interpretive statements are likely to reveal as much about the

²⁵ Which is, of course, impossible to know and highly unlikely.

²⁶ The dating of *Beowulf* is a controversial one. See Fulk 2010.

²⁷ See Tom Shippey for a fairly thorough discussion of the main points of contention about *Beowulf*.

interpreter as they do about the ‘authentic, true’ poem, which is bound to remain an instructible object of desire” (2). That does not, of course, prevent us from making those interpretive statements anyway.

2.4.1 *The Poet as a Character*

Though *Beowulf* illustrates an ancient Scandinavian society, perception is more about the author and the audience than the characters within a fictionalized world. Since *Beowulf* was written by an Anglo-Saxon and meant for an Anglo-Saxon audience, its depiction of the poet figure shows us Anglo-Saxon rather than Scandinavian perception. Therefore, the scenes in *Beowulf* that include a description of a poet figure offer an illustration of how Anglo-Saxons perceived the poet as a societal figure. Since the poem tells a fictionalized historic story, it is likely that the author and audience both viewed the poet figure in *Beowulf* as a representation of an antiquated Scandinavian oral performer. However, assuming that a similar figure was present in their own society, it is expected that the Anglo-Saxon perception would be distorted by the people’s own experiences with oral poets. The attributes displayed by the poet character and the demonstration of the poet’s societal role in *Beowulf* would show what sort of qualities were appreciated by the Anglo-Saxon people and how they recognized the poet position.

There are four passages in *Beowulf* that illustrate the poet or *scop* figure within society. Each one presents characteristics and qualities that tell us who and what the poet was meant to be or at least what the role meant to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Of the

passages, the one that stands out as the most specific in describing the poet character is the same that Niles discusses in relation to oral formulaic theory:

Hwīlum cyninges þegn,
 guma gīlphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
 sē ðe eal fela ealdgeseġena
 worn gemunde, word oþer fand
 sōðe ġebunden; secg eft ongan
 sīð Bēowulfes snyttrum styrian
 ond on spēd wrecan spel ġerāde,
 wordum wrixlan; wēlhwylc ġecwæð
 þæt hē fram Sigemunde[s] secgan hȳrde
 ellendædum, uncūþes fela, (867-76)

At times an attendant of the king, a man laden with glorious words, with a memory for stories, who remembered all the many multitudes of tales of old, came up with other words accurately assembled; the man in turn began sagely to recite Beowulf's exploit, to deliver successfully a skillful account, to make variations with words; he related everything that he had heard said about Sigmund's feats of courage, a great deal unfamiliar...

Though brief, this description of the king's attendant offers a fairly clear image of the poet figure. Even the title *cyninges þegn* is quite telling. The word *þegn* refers to a certain type of person in Anglo-Saxon society, and while "attendant" is a perfectly acceptable translation, it may distort the poet character. A thane was indeed a servant or retainer, but the title afforded more importance than how a present-day audience might perceive the word servant. Rather than being lowly or akin to slaves, thanes were people of rank and importance. They were often directly in service to a king or queen, and the title could

even give the status of nobility. In this passage from *Beowulf*, the title seems to indicate that the poet has a place in Hrothgar's court. We might think of him as an assumedly permanent form of entertainment at Heorot.

More than just the man's position can be gathered from this scene. The description also presents several characteristics that are now considered to be somewhat universal qualities of oral poets. The poet is *gilphlæden*, which is not just "laden with glorious words" but with boastful words.²⁸ Court singers did not recite tales of failures but of triumphs, of things that brought men glory. So often did they sing of these things that they were always filled with the necessary language. They always had the words. However, the achievements told by poets did not have to be new. This scene shows that the poet also recited songs about the past and the victories of men no longer living. It is for this reason that a good memory is a rather definitive quality of the poet as is clear in the depiction above. Just how much the poet had to remember is emphasized by several words with similar meanings used in succession. Fulk translates *eal fela* and *worn* as "all the many multitudes." This translation makes perfect sense within the context of the poem especially as this sort of repetition for emphasis is quite common in Old English poetry. However, it is likely that the phrase actually means something a bit different. While *eal* does mean "all" when it is used as an adjective, the newest edition of the

²⁸ *Gielp* is boastful or arrogant speech. The word is related to the verb *gielpian*, which can mean to boast or to exult or glory. "Glorious words" is, therefore, an acceptable translation, but a present-day audience would not likely connect glorious and boastful automatically, which is, in part, because of the different connotations of the two words. For an Anglo-Saxon audience, the two concepts would not have been considered separate because boasting was not a negative thing the way it is often perceived now.

*Klaeber's Beowulf*²⁹ recognizes this instance of the word as an adverb, which would make “entirely” or “fully” a more applicable translation. This interpretation would then mean that the poet remembers the entirety of each of the “tales of old” rather than emphasizing how many stories there are. This distinction is important because it shows how significant the stories were to their audience. Poets could not just learn the basis of each tale and make up the rest; they had to know the stories completely, which would require dedication as much as a good memory.

We also see here the skill that the poet must possess. Not only did the singing character have to find³⁰ the right words to tell the story (*word oþer fand sōðe gebunden*), but the words had to be “accurately assembled” and “deliver[ed] successfully.” These are just two of the many indications of the poet’s cleverness with words within the description. Still, the poet’s talent does not end with his ability “to make variation with words.” The poet also shows himself to be adept at composing quickly. As I discussed previously in relation to Niles’s analysis, this passage does suggest a certain level of spontaneity. Despite the likelihood that this scene takes place well into the day following Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel, no more than several hours could have separated the two events.³¹ We must then assume that the character possesses some unique artistic ability as

²⁹ Not only is Fulk one of the editors for this edition of the manuscript, but he also clearly states in the introduction to his translation that it “in nearly all respects accords with the interpretations offered in *Klaeber's Beowulf* (corrected reprint 2009).” This is apparently one of the few exceptions, though I see no particular reason why Fulk chose to divert from the interpretation here.

³⁰ *Fand* is from *findan*. It usually means “to find” but can also mean “to arrange.” Both are applicable in the given context.

³¹ Several hours is quite a long time and surely adequate to write a good poem if the author’s attention is not divided. The poet from the passage, though, is not so focused. He is part of a travel group that is concerned more with conversation and games than giving the poet peace and quiet.

improvising a “skillful account” could never be considered an easy task for an average person.

Furthermore, we can also learn something about this poet from how his singing is illustrated. His song about Beowulf is only mentioned in passing, but his recitation of Sigmund’s deeds is shown in its entirety. The introduction of the song, though, is what offers knowledge of the poet’s craft. He does not sing a specific song or relate a certain story. Rather, the poet recites “everything” he has heard about Sigmund. From this description, we can assume that the poet is singing a song of his own making. He has taken all of the stories he knows about a figure from northern legend, likely things he has learned from other poets, and composed them into a new song. We are also told that much of what the singer relays is “unfamiliar” or strange. What makes it so is not explained nor are we told who the stories are unfamiliar too. We may easily infer that the stories are not unknown to the performer as he is the one reciting them. The obvious answer then is the other men in the travel party. Sigmund and his story must have been recognizable to the general public including the singer’s audience, but he knew more than any other there. Altogether, we can combine the details to create a fairly complete idea of the poet character: a thane who provided entertainment, a historian with a good memory for heroic stories, and an artist skilled in the craft of composition. These characteristics show not just how such an actual person might have been perceived by a contemporary audience but also what attributes were important to them. These are the qualities that *Beowulf*’s contemporary audience expected from an oral poet, whether in real life or as a character.

2.4.2 *The Poet's Role in Society*

A single scene, a single presentation of a poet figure, is not enough to represent the position as a whole. Fortunately, the different mentions of a poet or performer in *Beowulf* complement each other well. Though none are as detailed as the one discussed above, the others help complete the illustration of the poet figure by confirming that many characteristics of the poet are universal and offering more insight into their role within society. The title *scop* is used for each poet figure in *Beowulf* aside from the one already discussed. One reason for this could be the fact that the scenes they are mentioned in all take place in Heorot. Court scenes make the singers appear more formal than when a performer makes up songs to pass the time on a journey.

The briefest mention of a *scop* is from lines 496 and 497 and states: *Scop hwīlum sang hādor on Heorote*: “Now and then the performer sang brightly in Heorot.” Not much information is given in this single sentence, but it does show the poet’s place in society. It seems as though a *scop* was often present in the royal hall to provide entertainment as that information is given casually along with other details of common society. We can also assume that there was only one *scop* present at the time since it is clear that the singer did not perform continuously but there is no mention of a replacement. How often or for how long the poet sang is not clear, but we are given the description of “brightly,”³² which would be unlikely for someone who overused their voice. The *scop* is clearly accustomed to such performances and must possess a vocal skill as well as an artistic one. I could be inferring too much from one line, but many of

³² *Hādor* can also mean “with a clear voice,” which might be appropriate for the connotation I suggest.

these details can be found repeated in either other scenes from *Beowulf* or other Old English poems.

Perhaps the best description of poetry as a societal function can be found in the second poetry scene in *Beowulf*.³³ Similar to the scene already discussed when a thane sings about Sigmund, a song about another known legend is performed later during the celebrations at Heorot. Before the reproduction of the poem within *Beowulf* is this depiction of the scene:

P̄ær w̄æs sang ond sw̄ēg samod ætgædere
fore Healfdenes hildewīsan,
gomenwudu gr̄eted, ḡid oft wrecen,
ðonne Healgamen, Hr̄oþgāres scop
æfter medobence m̄ænan scolde
Finnes eaferan; ðā h̄ie se f̄ær begeat,
h̄æleð Healf-Dena, Hn̄æf Scyldinga
in Fr̄eswæle feallan scolde. (1063-70)³⁴

There was singing joined with music in the presence of Healfdene's battle-leader, entertainment-wood touched, a narrative often related, when Healgamen, Hrothgar's singer, was to tell from the mead-bench of Finn's son; when the calamity overcame them, heroes of the Half-Danes, Hnæf of the Scyldings was to fall in the Frisian slaughter.

³³ By "poetry scene," I am referring to the two scenes in *Beowulf* that contain a poem within the poem. That is, they actually show the poetry being sung.

³⁴ Passages from *Beowulf* are from *Klaeber's Beowulf, Fourth Edition*, edited by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles.

Along with further evidence that the poet at Heorot was a permanent resident,³⁵ this passage illustrates what a poetry performance may have been like in a Scandinavian (or, possibly, Anglo-Saxon) court. First, the overlapping of the singing and the playing of an instrument is emphasized by the repetition of the idea with *samod ætgædere*, which both mean “together.” The playing is further described with *gomenwudu*, which (though literally “entertainment-wood”) refers to a wooden instrument used for entertainment purposes.³⁶ Who is singing and playing the instrument is unclear, but we can assume that at least more than one person is providing the entertainment because the singing and playing are already happening when Healgamen begins his song. Even if he is the one playing the instrument, someone else would have been doing the singing before it was time for him to recite the story of Finn’s sons.

This passage also reinforces some of the characteristics of the poet that are illustrated in other parts of the poem. Unlike the previous scene where only one scop is singing, the music and entertainment here is continuous. However, the scop Healgamen seems to have a specific role within the entertainment. The passage suggests that the music and singing at the start are not an actual performance. Rather, it is part of the celebration, a special occasion, not everyday life. The scop, on the other hand, has a continuous job to fulfill. Whenever there is drinking and merriment in the hall, there is a poet to perform. They sing for entertainment purposes rather than in celebration. Another aspect of the poet repeated here is the idea that the poets remembered and sang about

³⁵ I am making this conclusion under the assumption that Healgamen is the same poet mentioned in the travelling scene. It is, of course, possible that Hrothgar employed more than one oral poet, but even if he did, the possessive (both here and in the previously discussed passage) implies some sort of permanence.

³⁶ This was likely a harp or something similar.

history. Healgamen recites a known legend, sings about a recognized hero. Although the situation described here is more similar to the other two mentions of the scop in *Beowulf*, the song performance bears a strong resemblance to the song about Sigmund. In both, the singer presents a presumed recognizable story with intricate detail, showing a remarkable amount of skill. It is also worth noting that both extended scenes of poetry illustrate the performance of heroic tales. Of course, we know that not all Scandinavian poems were about heroic legends, but it was certainly a subject of some importance.

On the other hand, the last of the four scenes (though it is first within the poem) portrays an instance of singing that is not about heroes, past or present:

Þær wæs hearpan swēg,
 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe
 frumsceaft fīra feorran recċan,
 cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worh(te),
 wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,
 ġesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan,
 lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum,
 ond ġefræt Wade foldan scēatas
 leomum ond lēafum, lif ēac ġesceōp
 cynna ġehwylcum þāra ðe cwide hwyrfaþ. (89-98)

There was the music of the harp, the clear song of the performer. He who could reckon the origins of mortals from distant times said that the Almighty created the earth, a resplendent wonder, as far as contained by water – positioned, triumphant, sun and moon, lamps as illumination to landsmen, and embellished the surface of the earth with branches and leaves, likewise generated life in all the species that actively move about.

The first sentence of this passage contains nothing that I have not already discussed. From the type of music to the clarity of voice, this simple description is the most basic illustration of a scop performance and is very nearly the same as the one on lines 496 and 497. The second sentence, however, presents a unique image that is only found in this depiction of the poet. First, it gives a bit more insight into the characteristics of the poet figure. Here, the scop is called someone who understands the creation of men. The word *reccan* is particularly telling as it implies the ability to explain as well as to repeat. Therefore, the poet did not just recite creation myths from long ago but could also illuminate the stories to their audience. The rest of the sentence then gives the content that we are told the poet is able to deliver. This is where the reliability of the portrayal of society may come into question. It is certainly believable that an early Scandinavian poet might sing about creation. It is not believable that they would sing about creation from a Christian viewpoint. Instead, this passage is an example of the insertion of values I mentioned earlier from Frank's argument about *Beowulf*. Such an obvious instance of straying from historical culture could easily be used as evidence that the poem does not illustrate a realistic Scandinavian singer, but it might actually confirm the intimation of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet within the scop descriptions. Old English religious poetry is a thing that does exist (and did at the time of *Beowulf's* composition). Therefore, it is perfectly plausible to assume that the instance of a poet performing such a song might be just as realistic as the very existence of such a song. If the main stray from realism in the poem is the *Beowulf* poet inserting contemporary ideals and beliefs, surely, we could add practices to that list as well.

2.5 Conclusion

Any perception that is recognizable within a given society must originate from somewhere. Some come from the past. Many modern-day perceptions have been passed down from generation to generation despite their holding little relevance to today's society. In some cases, those perceptions were once realistic, but in others, the past societal views held no more truth than they do now. In those cases, it can be difficult to determine where the notions began. Sometimes, society perceives a role or group of people based on how we expect them to be. Of course, then we must question where that expectation comes from. Do we expect teachers to be irritable and bossy because they often were (or were considered to be) in the past or because we know that teachers have a difficult job for which they are underappreciated and underpaid, and we expect them to behave accordingly? Both seem like reasonable possibilities. So, how can we know what information any given perception provides if we cannot determine where it originates? Unfortunately, the most basic answer is that we cannot. At least, we cannot assume that any given perception offers any precise information about any specific aspect of society. We can, however, consider what a society's perception says about that society as a whole. Even if we may never be able to determine why society expects teachers to behave a certain way, we can gather enough accounts (fictional or historical) to know with some certainty that the perception exists. If we can ignore the inherent desire to explain that perception, then we can work towards understanding what it reveals about our society's values.

For the most part, the four mentions of the poet figure in *Beowulf* seem to blend to create one mostly complete depiction. Together, the characteristics and situation details illustrate the poet figure as both a singer (oral performer) and poet (composer). They were skilled with words as well as music and singing. They were a scholar. They understood and remembered all of the details required to successfully recite stories of the past, most often heroic legends. They held a set position in society. They performed for the sake of entertainment in both formal and informal situations. They possessed a wide range of capabilities and could perform spontaneously in any setting. But did they really exist? The answer is both definite and ambiguous. Surely some variant of the figure I have described did exist at some point in Anglo-Saxon history. The exact level to which they may have matched this depiction, though, is less certain. What is certain is that the societal culture in which the poem was produced perceived the oral poet this way.

Ultimately, the value of how *Beowulf* presents the poet figure is found more in what it says about the perception of Anglo-Saxon society than about verifiable fact. The figure described above may or may not have existed at some point, but the Anglo-Saxon people did assume that oral poets had those qualities. Society expected poets to be wise and skilled because it valued poets and their abilities. Poets were considered travelers with good memories because their audiences appreciated the vast body of stories that poets were able to tell. Of course, we might glean some ideas about the poet from such conjectures, but we can never be certain of their truthfulness. What we can be certain of is that Anglo-Saxon society respected poets and cherished them. Perceptions show us what people value. Understanding that allows us to understand them. It is as Niles has

said: “although facts about the oral poets of the early Middle Ages are likely to remain beyond our grasp, it is a people's fictions that chiefly reveal the habits of their hearts, and if we ignore their fictions we risk misunderstanding the people themselves” (10).

Chapter 3

Old English Poetry: Anglo-Saxon Perception of the Oral Poet

Now that I have established the importance of perception and its usefulness in discovering the Old English oral poet, it is important to look at more examples of the poet figure in Old English poetry. *Beowulf* is a good illustration of how oral poets were perceived by Anglo-Saxon society, but it is only one of the many poems that depict the oral poet as a character. In order to understand societal perception fully, it is necessary to look at other Old English poems that illustrate the poet figure as well. Several Old English poems include mentions, descriptions, or even just hints at the poet figure. Most of these references to the poet do not create the complete picture that can be found in *Beowulf*, but each offers a small piece of the puzzle that makes up the illustration of the oral poet according to Anglo-Saxon perception. Such mentions are usually quite vague, which makes them easier to apply to different situations or character types. Some give a few characteristics of the poet; others offer a view of performing poetry as a profession. Both are necessary to understand who the Old English poet might have been.

Often, the three poems that are considered evidence for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet are *Beowulf*, *Deor*, and *Widsith*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, both Frank and Niles discuss these poems for the information they give about the Anglo-Saxon *scop*. According to Frank, that these three poems are the basis for what we know about the Anglo-Saxon oral poet is “bad news,” since none of the poet characters described in the poems “is an Angle, Saxon, Jute, or even Frisian; all live on the continent, in a vague heroic period long before the narrators’ time” (28). This is certainly true for *Beowulf*, but

as the last chapter shows, the poem still offers valuable insight into the mindset of the *Beowulf* poet's contemporary society. The same can be said for *Deor* and *Widsith*, which will both be examined later in this chapter. However, what each poem offers is not the same nor is it the same as the other poems that will be discussed in this chapter. *Beowulf* only includes the poet figure as a background character who is given minor development. *Deor* and *Widsith*, on the other hand, provide a more in-depth look at the poet since both are written from the first-person point of view of a poet character. Both give the same type of general info about the *scop* as *Beowulf*, but the self-reflexive nature of the first-person narrative allows for a deeper and more personal understanding of the poet as a person.

Furthermore, while *Beowulf* is a good starting point when considering the poet figure within Old English poetry, it is not overly detailed. Other poems that show third-person representation of the oral poet reinforce the depiction of the poet provided by *Beowulf*, *Deor*, and *Widsith* while also giving more specifics about who the poet was and what part they played in Anglo-Saxon society (though I do discuss these poems before *Deor* and *Widsith* since those two represent a different narrative point of view). As it is the longest third-person description of a poet figure, *The Order of the World* offers the most detailed account of the poet's characteristics. *Vainglory*, then, adds to that description by illustrating an alternate subject matter for poets while also including first-person narrative to support the third-person depiction of the poet. Neither, however, say much about the poet's place in society. For more information on that topic, I will examine the brief mention of the *scop* in *Maxims I*.

When put together, these varying types of representation and description offer a complete illustration of how the oral poet was perceived by the Anglo-Saxons. Some poems offer characteristics of the poet, while others focus on what the poet sang about or what their position entailed. Many of the examples I have chosen overlap in some way, but a few aspects of the poet are unique to one poem or another. However, none of the portrayals of the poet in Old English poetry contradict each other. Instead, each distinct impression of the poet must be examined to identify the poet completely. Only when several different examples of Old English poetry that mention the oral poet are considered together is it possible to get a thorough understanding of the oral poet according to the perception of the Anglo-Saxons.

3.1 A Different Type of Third-Person Representation

Of the various types of representation mentioned in the first chapter, third-person impersonal description is perhaps the easiest to assume is accurate. Whether brief or extended, passages that discuss the poet as a figure in the third person often focus on descriptors or characteristics that are vague enough to be applicable to any poet. Rarely are such mentions specific enough even to narrow the subject to the Old English poet. It does not matter, though, whether or not the poet figures are meant to be representative of Old English poets. Rather, it is only important that they represent the poet as a general entity. Language and nationality matter little when the poet characters from different types of oral poetry could be switched without it being too noticeable. Instead, these types of mentions of the poet character offer insight into the Anglo-Saxon perception of

the oral poet. All oral poets share some qualities, but the ones repeatedly mentioned in Old English poetry show both what sort of characteristics were most recognizable to an Anglo-Saxon audience and what attributes were considered most important not just to Old English poets but by Anglo-Saxon society in general.

3.1.1 *Qualities of the Poet*

Perhaps the best example of a third-person account of the poet in Old English poetry (aside from *Beowulf*) comes from *The Order of the World*, one of the lesser-known poems from *The Exeter Book*. It is one of five shorter poems that create somewhat of a collection of homilies according to Krapp and Dobbie in their introduction of *The Exeter Book* (xxxix).³⁷ Although it is not very popular or often studied, a few scholars have argued the importance of the poem, but none as thoroughly as Robert DiNapoli. His article, “The Heart of the Visionary Experience: *The Order of the World* and Its Place in the Old English Canon,” stresses the virtues of the poem and “its importance to the entire canon of Old English poetry,” which DiNapoli believes is lacking in other studies that mention the poem. He even states that “it provides us with the only extended depiction we have of the Anglo-Saxon poet, a depiction compounded of dramatized self-portrait and a reconstructed memory of the poet’s putative forebears in his craft” (97). This suggestion is a bit too extreme as this chapter will show several (some rather extended) depictions of the Old English poet, but *The Order of the World* is perhaps the most direct.

³⁷ The five poems are *The Gifts of Men*, *Vainglory*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Order of the World*, and *The Judgement Day I*. Though these poems are not adjacent or anywhere near each other in *The Exeter Book*, they are similar enough that they are often considered to be a collection of didactic verse.

Furthermore, while I agree with DiNapoli that *The Order of the World* emphasizes the power of poetry, his argument focuses more on how the poem contradicts the established “assumptions about the Christian assimilation of Anglo-Saxon poetic forms” (107-108). However, only one part of DiNapoli’s discussion is applicable to my point, which is specific to what the poem says about the poet rather than what it says about poetry. He splits the poem into three sections; the first of which he says, “establishes the figure of the poet, both in the speaker’s own self-portrait and in his invoking of a tradition extending back from his present into deep recesses of antiquity” (97). According to DiNapoli, this first section is comprised of the first thirty-seven lines of the poem, but I am only concerned with the first twenty-two, which create a sort of introduction section for the poem.

In their introduction to *The Order of the World*, Krapp and Dobbie call the beginning section of the poem autobiographical and compare it to the similar opening of one of the other *Exeter Book* homilies, *Vainglory*. However, unlike the one in *Vainglory* (which will be further discussed later in this chapter), the introduction in *The Order of the World* does not include any first-person narrative. It does begin with direct address, but the imperative is about a third-person poet figure rather than the narrator. Of course, it could still be autobiographical, but there is nothing within the poem that particularly indicates such. The narrator even switches to first-person directly after the introductory section, so there is no reason to assume that they are simply talking about themselves in the third person at the start. DiNapoli asserts that “many details in section one suggest that we are dealing with both a generalized figure of the poet and a self-portrait of a particular

individual – i.e. that the speaker is here shaping a persona for himself, a congeries of conventions and allusions” (98). DiNapoli does not offer the aforementioned details or give any reasons for believing thus, and he also contradicts himself by consistently treating all mentions of the poet as though the poet is speaking about themselves. Since DiNapoli considers the first section to include the first-person narrative after the beginning introduction, I do not completely disagree with his statement, but the change from third to first person suggests a difference in perspective between the first twenty-two lines and the rest of the poem. Since the narrator describes the poet in the third-person without including self-reflection or first-person narrative, I will consider the introductory section to refer to a general poet figure rather than someone specific:

Wilt þu, fus hæle, fremdne monnan,
 wisne woðboran wordum gretan,
 fricgan felageongne ymb forðgesceaft,
 biddan þe gesecege sidra gesceafta
 cræftas cyndelice cwichrerende,
 þa þe dogra gehwam þurh dom godes
 bringe wundra fela wera cneorissum!
 Is þara anra gehwam orgeate taken,
 þam þurh wisdom woruld ealle con
 behabban on hreþre, hycgende mon,
 þæt geara iu, gliwes cræfte,
 mid gieddingum guman oft wrecan,
 rincas rædfæste; cuþon ryht spreca,
 þæt a fricgende fira cynnes
 ond secgende searoruna gespon
 a gemyndge mæst monna wiston.

Forþon scyle ascian, se þe on elne leofað,
 deophydig mon, dygelra gesceafta,
 bewritan in gewitte wordhordes cræft,
 fæstnian ferðsefan, þencan forð teala;
 ne sceal þæs aþreotan þegn modigne,
 þæt he wislice woruld fulgonge. (1-22)³⁸

Resolve, eager one, to greet the stranger,
 the wise singer, with words,
 ask the much-travelled one about the created world,
 that he should tell you about the living and moving
 natural powers of the spacious creations,
 which every day through the judgement of God
 bring many wonders to the human race.
 Each one of those wonders is a well-known sign
 to the one who through wisdom knows how to comprehend
 the whole world in his heart, the person thinking about
 what formerly in days gone by, men, resolute warriors,
 by the power of music often recited
 in songs; they know how to speak rightly
 always questioning and saying,
 always mindful, what the best of mankind
 knew of the web of mysteries.
 Therefore, whoever will live in courage,
 the deeply meditating one, must ask the secret creations,
 inscribe in mind the craft of the word hoard,
 make firm the heart, think properly;
 a noble-minded attendant must not grow tired

³⁸ Poems from *The Exeter Book* are from Krapp and Dobbie 1936.

of engaging wholly and wisely in the world.³⁹

Though the section is rather long, it is necessary to show the introduction of the poem in its entirety since nearly every line either names or describes the poet. Through variation, the poet figure is given several descriptive titles or names. The first of them is *fremdne monnan*, which Bjork translates as “the stranger” but is more literally “the foreign man.” Either way, the narrator is implying that the poet figure is unknown to whoever the intended audience is. This point is further supported by the adjective *felageongne*, which modifies an implied impersonal pronoun to make the variant name “the much-traveled one.” This distinction is important because it illustrates the elusiveness of the poet. It does not matter who the narrator is speaking to because the poet is always a stranger or foreigner, moving from place to place without settling anywhere. These travels make the singer wise⁴⁰ in the ways of the world. They are expected to know about “the created world” and all of its inhabitants. Although *The Order of the World* is a religious poem, the beginning section only mentions God once, and it is only off-handedly. The narrator does not command the audience to ask the experienced poet about God but about the world and mankind because that is what the poet is expected to know. Poets were travelers. They were worldly. Consequently, much of their knowledge and wisdom was about the world.

However, Anglo-Saxon poets did not only know the world they lived in. They were also expected to know the world as it was before. Written records were not available

³⁹ All translations of poems from *The Exeter Book* are from Bjork 2014.

⁴⁰ *Wisne* could also mean “experienced.”

to everyone, but poetry was. It was a form of commemoration, a way to remember the past. This passage from *The Order of the World* reveals a few different things about the role of poetry in recording history. The first is that the poet was expected to know important events from the past. Bjork uses the word “thinking” to say what “the person” does with history, but *hycgende* can also mean remembering or reflecting. The poet was the person who remembered. However, it is not clear about whether the poet remembers the past in the form of song or in the form of story. It is possible that poets performed songs from the past as well as their own, but it is unlikely that such a practice could be done without the songs changing at all throughout the years. Since most songs composed orally were not immediately recorded, there would have been no way for poets to be certain that they remembered any song correctly once they were no longer with whoever taught it to them. Naturally, the songs would experience at least minor changes between many teachings. Therefore, the stories, the historical events, are what is important. As long as the story survives, it does not matter what music or words are used. How long the stories usually survived is unclear. The poet could have known the happenings of the past couple of generations or the past several centuries, but there is some emphasis put on the antiquity of certain stories. The two words *geara* and *iu* have the same basic meaning of formerly or in former times. Using the two words together (especially right next to each other) puts a certain stress on the idea that the words represent. The poet does not just remember the songs and stories about the things that happened recently but also those that happened a long time ago. Therefore, the poet was something of a historical record.

Scholars had the only written records of history,⁴¹ but everyone else had poets to teach them about the past.

The types of roles the poet played are not the only facets of the poet that can be determined from *The Order of the World's* introduction. There are some qualities that can be assumed from the positions of traveler and history keeper, but this poem also lists some specific characteristics of the poet figure.⁴² One is that the poet must possess some amount of skill. This quality is illustrated in both the description of poets from the past and the description of the poet subject of the passage. The past poets are said to have known “how to speak rightly,” which implies some sort of talent with words, but the depiction of the poet figure towards the end of the passage is even more expressive in its indication of skill. In particular, the phrase *bewritan in gewitte wordhordes cræft* offers a unique illustration of how the Anglo-Saxons perceived poetic abilities, which is shown in Bjork’s translation “inscribe in the mind the craft of the word hoard.” However, some nuances of the original words are lost in translation.⁴³ As a compound, *wordhord* is quite self-explanatory meaning “treasury of words.” With *cræft*, though, the word gains new meaning. *Cræft* by itself has several different meanings. It can mean “power,” which would give some agency to *wordhord*, but it can also indicate an artistic skill. The latter

⁴¹ Historical documents and the use of them for learning were confined to monasteries. Common people did not have access to such teaching.

⁴² As the qualities that relate to the mentioned roles have already been discussed, I will not repeat them (i.e. the wisdom gained from travel or the memory needed to recall the past). Even though wisdom is mentioned several times in the introduction, my discussion of how it relates to the poet’s travel and knowledge of the world shows its main function in the description. Later uses merely repeat the same idea.

⁴³ There is really no way to translate this phrase without losing meaning somewhere. Several of the words have distinct connotations both separately and put together. Understanding each word fully is really the only way to imagine what the phrase might have meant to an Anglo-Saxon audience, but even then, it is impossible to know which implications apply in any given phrase or situation.

of these meanings is particularly applicable when considering the separate constituents. *Word* can go with *cræft* just as easily as *hord*. As a compound, *wordcræft* means “poetic art.” Together, the phrase then offers a sort of artistic distinction to the ability or skill of acquiring and using a treasury of words, an ability that was the essence of the poet.

One more distinctive aspect of the poet is easily recognizable in the above passage. Along with (or perhaps because of) their worldly wisdom and artistic capabilities, the poet also possesses a certain aura of mystery. They know the secrets of the world, the things that no one else understands. Just as with the mentions of skill, there is evidence of the mysteriousness or secrecy involved with the poet figure in both the implied past poets and the poet subject of *The Order of the World's* beginning. The poets from the past⁴⁴ are said to have known of “the web of mysteries.” What that phrase refers to is never made clear, but we can make some conjectures from the connotations of the Old English words *searoruna gespon*. “Mysteries” is not an inaccurate translation of *searoruna*, but it only encompasses one part of the compound. A more complete translation would be “the art of secrecy,” but even that misses some of implications of each constituent. *Searo* can mean art in the sense of skill or craft, but it can also mean contrivance or cunning. There is a sort of trickiness implied that only furthers the undertones of *run*, which means mystery, secrecy, or even whisper. So, “whispers of

⁴⁴ It is unclear who “the best of mankind” is referring to. It is unlikely that it is renaming the men or “resolute warriors” from earlier in the sentence, but it seems still to reference poet figures. Bjork’s phrasing suggests that “the best of mankind” is referring to poets who were models for the “resolute warriors” [poets] who were models for “the stranger” [poet] who is the model for the second-person audience of the poem. Such a pattern might indicate that poets learned history and wisdom as much from other poets as they did from travels and experiences. – See DiNapoli for a discussion of other interpretations of who this passage refers to.

contrivance” is just as applicable as any other translation mentioned but hints at a darker meaning. The addition of *gespon*, then, makes the phrase even more difficult to translate. Bjork seems to translate *gespon* as coming from *gespann*, which means joining or bond. DiNapoli, though, translates the whole phrase as “the prompting of mysteries.” In his version, *gespon* comes from *gespan*, which means suggestion or persuasion. I agree more with DiNapoli’s treatment of the word, since *gespon* does usually equate *gespan*. However, there is some intricacy to *gespan* that DiNapoli leaves out of his translation. To go with the undertones of *searorun*, “allurement” is a more applicable translation of *gespan* in this case. Therefore, the poem is not just saying that the past poets knew of some sort of mystery, but that they understood how tempting the craft of poetry is. Poetry is an artform filled with mystery and intrigue. It is alluring to many, but none appreciate that fact as well as those who have given in to the temptation. This distinction is not one usually discussed in scholarship about the poet figure. Even DiNapoli, who discusses the phrase *searoruna gespon* at length, ignores the subtleties of the words and instead focusses on attempting to discover what type of mysteries are being discussed. However, the mysteriousness of the poet is important. It aligns the image of the poet more with that of an artist than a common thane. Of course, oral poets were usually in the service of a noble, but they were not like those who served in other ways. All poets, even those from vaguely ancient societies, must possess a unique sensibility in order to compose with artistic skill.

Together, all of these qualities and character roles create a fairly complete illustration of who the poet might have been or at least how they were perceived. They

were worldly travelers and keepers of history, wise and experienced. They were capable artists and craftsmen, skilled and mysterious. Most of all, though, poets were brethren who understood each other. *The Order of the World's* narrator tells us to ask the poet about their knowledge, but we can never comprehend it the way other poets could. That sort of experience must be lived to be fully understood and appreciated.

The Order of the World shows the same type of content for the poet characters as *Beowulf*: stories about the past. This was not the only common content for poetry, though. Such poetry was quite common, of course, but a considerable amount of Old English poetry is about religion and Christianity. To show an example that describes composition (or at least recitation) of religious poetry, I wish to discuss another of the homiletic poems: *Vainglory*. As mentioned before, *Vainglory* begins similarly to *The Order of the World*. Though it is a bit shorter, a beginning section starts the poem by offering a descriptive scene about a poet character and their interactions with the narrator:

Hwæt, me frod wita on fyrndagum
 sægde, snottor ar, sundorwundra fela!
 Wordhord onwreah witgan larum
 beorn boca gleaw, bodan ærcwide,
 þæt ic soðlice sippan meahhte
 ongitan bi þam gealdre godes agen bearn,
 wilgest on wicum, ond þone wacran swa some,
 scyldum bescyredne, on gescead witan. (1-8)

Yes, a wise sage in days gone by,
 a prudent messenger, told me many special wonders.
 The man skilled in books through the teachings of the prophet
 unfolded his word hoard, the former speech of the herald,

so that I could truthfully
 by means of that teaching perceive God's own son,
 welcome guest in the habitations, and could distinguish
 the weaker one as well, deprived through sins.

Now, this scene is not as obviously about a travelling poet as the one from *The Order of the World*. It names a “wise sage” or “prudent messenger,” but does not directly indicate that this person is a *scop*. Of course, *The Order of the World* does not name the poet figure as a *scop* either, but the names used are far more indicative of an oral performer than the ones used here. First, there is the difference between *woðbora*, which is used in *The Order of the World*, and *wita*, which is used in *Vainglory*. Unlike the title *scop*, *woðbora* does not automatically reveal an oral performer. It can mean poet or singer, but it could also mean prophet or orator. The word is a self-explaining compound made up of the words *woð*, which can mean sound, voice, song, or poetry, and *bora*, which simply means bearer. The compound, then, indicates a bearer of sound, voice, song, or poetry. Therefore, the orality of the *woðbora* is not in question, but what the person is delivering could be. It certainly could be oral poetry and in *The Order of the World*, it likely is,⁴⁵ but it could be speech or something else, too. Either way, *woðbora* does suggest some sort of oral deliverance. *Wita*, however, does not. It refers to a sage or elder, someone full of wisdom. This wisdom is emphasized by the adjective *frod* (“wise”) and again by the variation *snottor ar* (“prudent messenger”). None of these words, however, signifies that

⁴⁵ The rest of the introduction scene offers enough context to indicate that its subject is an oral poet or singer.

the person being discussed is a poet. My reasoning for such an assumption is based mostly on two factors: the use of first-person and the parallels to *The Order of the World*.

This short passage is very similar to the beginning of *The Order of the World* in several different ways. Krapp and Dobbie made the assertion that the beginning lines of *Vainglory* “seem to bear no organic relationship to the rest of the poem,” which is nearly identical to what they say about the introduction section of *The Order of the World* (xl). Many scholars have since disproved Krapp’s and Dobbie’s claim about *Vainglory*,⁴⁶ but the connection between the two poems’ first lines remains. Each poem sets up a scenario of a wise mentor-type figure teaching their audience (whether the poem’s audience or the poem’s narrator) the content that makes up the rest of the poem. In both cases, the subject is written about using third-person representation, and the description in *Vainglory* shows similar content to that in *The Order of the World*. The subject figure is portrayed both through variation and through explanation of their knowledge and skill. Along with the repetition of wise as a descriptor, the same types of skills are shared between the subject of *Vainglory*’s introduction and the poet in *The Order of the World*. *Vainglory*’s “sage” is said to be “skilled in books,” though perhaps “learned in scripture” is a bit more applicable here. Either way, the person knows their material. What they do with that material, though, is debatable. It is, of course, possible that they simply teach it, but there is some implication of oral poetry from the phrase *wordhord onwreah*. Though it is not directly referencing poetry, *wordhord* is often used in descriptions of the oral poet’s

⁴⁶ See Proctor for a discussion of editors since Krapp and Dobbie.

skills.⁴⁷ The act of unfolding or revealing one's treasury of words is a fairly common way to describe poetry composition in Old English. Together, the parallels between the beginning of *Vainglory* and *The Order of the World* hint at the subjects being similar figures. However, that alone is not enough to prove that *Vainglory* is discussing a poet.

Another hint that *Vainglory*'s first eight lines is talking about a poet is the use of first-person. As mentioned before, *The Order of the World* avoids first-person in the beginning section and instead uses second person to set the scene. The narrator tells us, the audience, to learn from the poet subject. The narrator of *Vainglory*, though, recounts what they have learned from the subject character. The "sage" figure is not meant to teach us but was the teacher of the narrator.⁴⁸ After the introduction scene, the narrator then transfers what they have learned to the audience through didactic verse. Since the medium of this scene is poetry, the narrator is obviously a poet. Of course, that does not automatically mean that they learned their subject material from another poet, but it does seem likely. Between the two introduction scenes, it is easy to see a pattern of teaching. Poets recite songs about what they know to teach the audience about the past, the world, and God. For some, the teaching ends there, but others (current or future poets) take what they learn and use it in their own poetry to teach others, thus continuing the cycle. The

⁴⁷ There are many examples of this in Old English poetry, including *Order of the World*. Other examples can be found in *Andreas* and *Meters of Boethius*, as well as other poems discussed in this chapter (i.e. *Beowulf* and *Widsith*).

⁴⁸ As I discussed earlier, there is some evidence in *The Order of the World* that poets learned at least some of the content that they sang about from other poets.

phrase *witgan larum* also contributes to illustrating the pattern by showing that the “sage” figure learned what he knows from another “prophet” or “wise man.”⁴⁹

So, if we conclude that both characters in the beginning lines of *Vainglory* are poets (the narrator and the “sage” figure), the characteristics they display offer more insight into the poet figure in general. Although the manner of teaching is similar to that in *The Order of the World*, the content is quite different. I mentioned before that *The Order of the World's* introduction lacks religious material. *Vainglory* is quite the opposite. Therefore, even though both poems consistently emphasize the wisdom of the poet, they differ in what the poet is wise about. *The Order of the World* shows that poet knows about the world, past and present. *Vainglory*, however, focuses on the poet’s spiritual understanding. In fact, all of the knowledge illustrated in *Vainglory's* beginning scene is about God. I noted before that the “sage” is a person “learned in scripture,” which is the only specific reference to their knowledge. Other mentions of what they know are vaguer such as “many special wonders.” However, the poem does make it clear that all of the “sage’s” teachings are religious because they all lead to the narrator “by means of that teaching” being able to recognize those who are virtuous and those who are not. This emphasis on religious knowledge is then accentuated by the rest of the poem, which illustrates the narrator using the teachings to show how to distinguish “God’s own son” from “the weaker one.” Therefore, this passage might not offer much information about the poet’s character or role in society, but it does illustrate the poet as a religious

⁴⁹ Many of the names used in this section of *Vainglory* overlap in possible meanings. The two most evident are “wise man” and “prophet,” both of which could be translations for *witgan*.

student and teacher. Christianity played an important role in Anglo-Saxon society, and since poets were scholars and teachers, Christianity was important to them, as well.

One last thing to note about *Vainglory* is that my analysis assumes that there is only one third-person figure alluded to in the beginning of the poem. This reading is supported by Rosemary Proctor, who included two essays in the introduction of her translation “An Edition of *Vainglory*.” The first of the essays is titled “The Prophet and the Speaker” and is mostly concerned with reinterpreting the beginning lines of the poem. According to Proctor, “the poem’s introductory lines are usually taken to mean that the teachings of some authority figure, ‘witgan larum’ (3b), have been passed on to the speaker by a wise man, or ‘frod wita’ (1a),” and her essay “aims to provide a plausible re-reading which removes the ‘wise man’ element, and asserts that there is just one authority figure — a prophet — who has imparted wisdom to the speaker” (53). My own reading presumes that *witgan larum* is variation used to rename the wise poet character first described as *frod wita*. While such a reading is not unfounded, Proctor’s essay provides the necessary reinforcement that includes a discussion of the opposing position.

3.1.2 *The Poet’s Place in Society*

More than just character traits are necessary to understand who the poet was, though. It is also important to realize how poetry worked and what it was meant to do in the context of society. While *The Order of the World* does not offer much insight into the poet’s role within society, other poems from *The Exeter Book* do. One such poem is *Maxims I*, which is a collection of gnomic verses. The poem is split into three sections,

though there is no concrete evidence that the sections were not meant to be distinguished as separate poems.⁵⁰ Each section is rather diverse in subjects, but all three include some sort of description of different types of people and their place in the world.⁵¹ Unlike the many declarations of how one must think and act that can be found throughout the poem,⁵² the remark about the poet comes from the second section in a line that catalogs things that are proper or appropriate.⁵³ One thing on the list is *god scop gumum* or “that there is a good poet for people” (126). There is little description here and no further discussion of the poet in this poem, yet something can be ascertained from it by considering the other things the *Maxims* poet considers appropriate:

Gold geriseþ on guman sweorde,
 sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene,
 god scop gumum, garniþ werum,
 wig towiþre wicfreoþa healdan. (124-27)

It is fitting that gold is on a man’s sword,
 a rare ornament of victory, that treasure is on a queen,
 that there is a good poet for people, that men take up
 spears to preserve a dwelling’s protection in time of war.

Rather than the more obvious necessities that poet enumerates in the lines following these,⁵⁴ the things listed here show a more idealistic vision of society. It is not absolutely

⁵⁰ See Krapp’s and Dobbie’s introduction of the poem for further discussion of the arrangement.

⁵¹ See Williams, *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*, for a discussion of the different topics in *Maxims I*.

⁵² These types of statements can be found in each section and are not limited to people. As heterogeneous as *Maxims I* is, the poem is consistent throughout in its generous use of modal verbs.

⁵³ This description is from the meaning of the word *geriseþ*, which comes from *gerīsan*.

⁵⁴ “A shield must be with the warrior, a shaft with the raider,/ a ring must be with the bride, books with the student,/ the eucharist with holy men, sins with the heathens” (Bjork 128-30).

necessary for there to be gold on a man's sword any more than it is for there to be treasure on a queen, but these things are still an integral part of Anglo-Saxon culture. If life is good and everything is how it is supposed to be then these things happen. The same goes for having a poet. It is not a necessity, but it is still an important ideal. It is also important to note that the ideal is not just having a poet but that the poet is good (likely in terms of skill) and that the poet is for [the] people. Just as treasure (or jewelry) is meant to be on a queen, the poet is meant to be for everyone, not just nobles.

Altogether, these different accounts of third-person representation of the poet character work to reinforce the image of the poet found in *Beowulf*. Often, third person mentions of the poet indicate a specific character in the poem as is done in *Beowulf* as well as the scene from *The Odyssey* mentioned in the first chapter. However, the three poems examined here all illustrate a vague, nameless person who represents the poet character. The ambiguity of these depictions allows for the image they create to be applied to nearly any oral poet. This is important for two reasons. The first is that these types of impersonal description are necessary to reinforce the image of the poet found in more specific references. Any one depiction of the poet as a character would not be enough to represent an entire culture's perception. Yet, when one specific poet character (such as the one presented in *Beowulf*) displays features that can also be found scattered throughout other mentions of the poet figure in Old English poetry, it is more likely that those character traits align with how the poet was considered by the Anglo-Saxon people. The second reason that impersonal third-person representations of the poet are important is because they show what qualities of the poet were valued by the Anglo-Saxon people.

Whether or not the poets described here are realistic, they are certainly idealistic. Most impersonal third person representations of an oral poet show positive qualities. However, despite the interchangeability of most attributes of the oral poet, the likelihood of any characteristic being used to describe a poet depends on the cultural setting of the author and audience. Some aspects of the poet are more likely to be found in Ancient Greek poetry, while others are particularly common in Old English poems. The repetition of those qualities shows how important they were to the contemporary society's perception of the poet.

3.2 First-Person Representation

First-person representation of the poet figure is perhaps less reliable than third-person descriptions mostly due to how common first-person narrative is in Old English poetry and how improbable it is that each of those narratives provides a true account. Autobiographical elements are common in this type of narrative, but it is usually clear that the persona who is voicing the first-person narrative is fictional. Even so, the self-reflexive nature of this type of representation (especially when the voice of the narrator is a poet) makes them more likely to be realistic. When an author writes from the point of view of someone they relate to or identify with, it is often more believable than when someone writes from the perspective of a type of person they only know from observation or interactions. The same idea works with the fictional characters who narrate Old English poetry. It is impossible to know if *The Seafarer* or *The Wife's Lament* give realistic accounts because we cannot know what the authors of the poems

experiences with sailors or suffering women were. However, we can be quite sure that the author of any poem has some experience as a poet whether they only composed or also performed. Ultimately, some of that experience must bleed into their writing when they use first-person narrative from a poet character.

3.2.1 *Examples of First-Person Narrative from a Poet Character*

While the use of first-person in *Vainglory* does help identify the characters as poets, such inference is not always necessary. Often, first-person narrative in Old English poetry makes the subject's role as a poetry performer very clear. Two poems, in particular, offer a detailed description of the poet through self-reflexive narrative: *Widsith* and *Deor*. These two poems are well-known for their illustration of the oral poet, and both are mentioned prominently in Niles's article, which was discussed in the first chapter, "The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet." In a section where Niles looks "at some poetry that has an obvious relevance to the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet for the reason that it contains vivid portraits of the bard," Niles examines scenes from both *Widsith* and *Deor* because of "their portraits of the idealized court singer" (23, 25).⁵⁵ This reasoning does make both poems great examples of the poet figure, but some passages show more characterization than others. For *Widsith*, Niles focuses on the final passage, which he says is "the noblest portrait we have of the early Germanic bard" (26). With descriptions such as "earns praise" and "has immutable glory under the heavens," it is true that *Widsith's* last several lines paints a rather positive image of the "minstrel" (135-

⁵⁵ Niles focuses more on *Deor* for this discussion as he had previously written about *Widsith*.

143). I also agree with Niles that “nowhere else in Old English literature is the theme of the bard's role in bestowing the immortality of fame given such succinct and emphatic expression” (26). However, I would not necessarily say that this theme offers much insight about the poet. It certainly tells us how some may have viewed poetry or perhaps why some pursued it, but it does tell us who the poet was. Surely “the immortality of fame” was not the goal of most poets. Since we know there is little record of poets, it seems rather improbable that one would become a poet just for recognition. Therefore, such a prospect might have tempted some but likely did not define the position as a whole.

Some semblance of the poet figure can still be found in *Widsith*, though. Since the majority of the poem is direct speech,⁵⁶ *Widsith* is unique in showing both third-person and first-person representation of the same poet figure. The poem begins with the same type of depiction that has been discussed for third-person descriptions throughout this chapter:

Widsið maðolade, wordhord onleac,
 se þe monna mæst mægþa ofer eorþan,
 folca geondferde; (1-3)

Widsith spoke, unlocked his word hoard,
 he who passed through most nations
 and peoples across the earth;

⁵⁶ Most editions of the poem including the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* considers lines 10-134 direct speech.

Though very brief, this portrayal aligns with what has already been surmised about the poet figure as well as offers a distinction to the power of the poet. The illustration of the poet as a world traveler does not reveal anything new about the Old English poet, but the repetition does demonstrate the validity of that character trait. The first line includes a very common way to describe what the poet does. The phrase *wordhord onleac* is nearly the same as the *wordhord onwreah* from *Vainglory*; both have the same literal (revealed his treasury of words) and implied (recited or composed poetry) meanings and are clearly from a formulaic system. They each combine *wordhord* with a verb that implies speaking and form a metrical type E. The only difference between the two is the alliteration. However, since the *Widsith* line is in the off-verse, where double alliteration is forbidden, and the *Vainglory* verse is in the on-verse, where double alliteration is preferred with a true compound, the inconsistency makes sense. Such a formulaic system suggests that the idea of revealing or unlocking a “word hoard” was a very common and recognized way to describe the act of composing poetry. The two parts of the system, then, offer an idea of what that act meant to the Anglo-Saxon people. First, it is important to note that the system is formed around the kenning, *wordhord*, which places emphasis on that particular word. For a kenning, the word is rather straight-forward, and only part of it is figurative. *Word* translates as “word” and actually means word in this context. *Hord*, then, translates as “hoard” and is meant to create an image of a hoard or treasury filled with words. The verbs used in the formula then work with that image and enhance it. Words cannot be locked, but a treasury can and usually is. This implies a sort of reverence to the words that poets use. They are something valuable that needs to be locked away to be protected.

Only the poet has the ability to unlock the treasury and share the words, the treasure, with the world.

Still, there is more to be discovered about the poet from *Widsith*, especially within the direct speech. Twice in the beginning of the direct speech some variant of “I have heard” is used to show that Widsith is reciting knowledge that he has learned from others.⁵⁷ Most of the content of his direct speech is giving that information, but some reflects on his own experiences. Perhaps the most applicable passage for illustrating the oral poet as a societal figure is when Widsith discusses his experiences performing for different peoples:

Forþon ic mæg singan ond secgan spell,
 mænan fore mengo in meoduhealle
 hu me cynegode cystum dohten. (54-56)

Therefore I can sing and tell a tale,
 declare before the company in the mead hall
 how the nobles were kind to me with choice gifts.

Directly following these lines, Widsith lists many different peoples he has been with and for some, gives additional details of his time with them. By doing this, he creates a picture of oral poetry as a profession. He begins with “I can sing and tell a tale,” which shows his ability to perform the job as well as what the job really is. He then offers a possibility of what he might sing about: “how the nobles were kind to me with choice gifts.” Now, this line creates a self-referential perception that is rather layered. The narrator of the poem is singing about a poet named Widsith who sings about being able to

⁵⁷ The two instances are in lines 10 and 17.

sing about his past experiences singing and then proceeds to do so. The image is self-reflexive to the point of exaggeration. Nevertheless, that exaggeration does present a fairly clear depiction of the oral poet's job. The poet is meant to "declare before the company in the mead hall" some sort of song that tells a story of something that the poet knows. Often those stories come from the poet's own experiences whether they sing about what they have personally done or what they have witnessed their lord or another warrior do or what they have been taught by other poets. The nobles who employ them then give the poets gifts in exchange for their performances.⁵⁸ This sort of experience happened with each place the poet travelled, and they were able to entertain by telling stories about their travels and encounters (which included the experiences of singing for other nobles). Widsith follows the pattern exactly but offers extra details for the places he received the best gifts. Such a practice would work as an incentive to each lord he performed for. The nobles would understand that if they gave good gifts, they would be featured more prominently in the next version of Widsith's continuously expanding song.

The last Old English poem I wish to examine is the only one discussed in this study that is written entirely in the first-person. *Deor* takes the voice of the fictional oral poet persona of Deor⁵⁹. The poem is rather short (at least in comparison to the others I have mentioned), and each stanza relates a story about someone (some a specific legendary figure from Germanic lore, some a general group of people) who suffered

⁵⁸ The poem gives more specific examples of this later in the narrative such as *me þær Guðhere forgeaf glædlicne maþpum/ songes to leane*, which is "Guthhere gave me the bright treasure there/ as a reward for a song" (66-67).

⁵⁹ Krapp and Dobbie have briefly discussed the "purely fictitious" autobiography of the poem, and also point to Lawrence, *Modern Philology* IX, 40ff as an additional source on the topic (liii).

some sort of hardship. The second half of the final stanza,⁶⁰ then, recounts a personal narrative about Deor's own difficult experiences:

Pæt ic bi me sylfum secgan wille,
 þæt ic hwile wæs Heodeninga scop,
 dryhtne dyre. Me wæs Deor noma.
 Ahte ic fela wintra folgað tilne,
 holdne hlaford, oppæt Heorrenda nu,
 leoðcræftig monn londryht geþah,
 þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde.
 Pæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg! (35-42)

I want to relate this about myself,
 that for a while I was the poet of the Heodeningas,
 dear to my lord. My name was Deor.
 For many winters I possessed a good service,
 a gracious lord, until Heorrenda now,
 the man skilled in song craft, received the land-right
 that the protector of men before gave to me.

That passed away; so can this.

Unlike the rest of the poem, the final stanza begins with a statement of intent. The other stanzas either immediately relate what befell the subject or reminds the audience that these stories are commonly known. When they do the second, the *Deor* poet uses first-person plural to unify the Deor character and the audience: *we geascodan*: “we have learned” (21). This practice shows that Deor is not reciting these stories for the sake of teaching them to his audience. Rather, he is using familiar tales to accentuate and repeat

⁶⁰ I am using the stanza breaks found in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records. Some versions, including Bjork's, splits the final stanza into two.

his message that ends each stanza: that passed away; so can this. Then, perhaps to make it more personal, the narrator changes number in last section and makes it very clear that he is now talking about himself. The first-person pronoun in line 36 would be enough to show that the final anecdote is about him, but Deor also uses *sylfum*, which emphasizes the self-reflexivity of this part of the poem. As I discussed before, this sort of self-reflection makes it more likely that the author of the poem is using their own experiences to create this character.

Similar to *Beowulf*, this narrative names a people, the Heodeningas, who must have lived at a time and place far removed from when the poem was composed. It also depicts a poet position comparable to the one alluded to in *Beowulf*: a somewhat permanent form of entertainment at the hall of a noble. Since this account is self-reflexive, the poet position is more detailed than it is in *Beowulf*. Here, it is very clear that the position is not short-lived with the distinction of “many winters.” However, Deor also makes it clear that his place with his lord was not permanent. As with any job, poets had to perform well to keep their position. Deor must have been quite skilled to be in the service of a “gracious lord” for so long. He was given a “land-right” and served his lord in contentment for years. In this way, Deor is parallel to Healgamen, Hrothgar’s *scop*.

However, Deor’s account illustrates the closure of his position as well as its occurrence, which is something that makes it unique. The scenes in *Beowulf* only describe the poet during his time as a thane of the king. *Widsith*, then, shows a poet who performed for many kings and nobles without ever seeming to settle. Neither, though, shows how or why a poet might leave a place or lord they served. *Deor* fills that gap by

showing what is perhaps the least desirable possible outcome. Rather than finishing out his life in his comfortable position, Deor was replaced by another poet, one that is, we assume, more skilled than Deor. It is what anyone without some sort of job security fears: their loyalty and service mattering little when someone more talented comes along. Deor does not say what happens next. Perhaps he looks for another lord to serve, or perhaps he wanders alone for the remainder of his life. What is clear, though, is that the poet's position is transitory, its continuation not guaranteed. This aspect is just one more that fits with the others to create a complete image of who the poet was.

Unlike the impersonal third-person representation of the poet discussed above, *Deor* and *Widsith* both name and depict a specific poet character. In this way, they are more similar to *Beowulf*, which does the same. How they differ from *Beowulf*, then, is in type of representation they present. While *Beowulf* only describes the poet briefly as a third-person background character, both *Deor* and *Widsith* illustrate the poet as the first-person narrator of the poem (or, in the case of *Widsith*, the majority of the poem). The self-reflexive nature of these examples of first-person narrative indicate that the authors of the poems likely include some intimation of how they perceive themselves into the descriptions, which allows for an increased probability that the descriptions are more accurate as representations of the poets from the author's contemporary society.

3.3 Conclusion

Beowulf is a wonderful example of a detailed *scop* character. It shows who the poet was, what they sang about, and what their role was within society. However, it does

portray a fictional version of a historical society far removed from the *Beowulf* poet's contemporary culture. That fact does not take away from the portrayal's value, but it does make it difficult to know how much the characters in the poem might resemble the oral poets they were meant to display or if they were illustrated more similarly to the poet who composed them. If the descriptions in *Beowulf* are plausibly accurate to what they meant to illustrate is something that would require further examination of ancient Scandinavian society, which is something that will be briefly discussed in the conclusion. As for the second possibility, the passages I have examined throughout this chapter show enough continuity to make it likely that they were all written with some overlapping ideas about the poet in mind. These poems all vary in content, genre, and setting as well as the type of representation they present. For a truly complete view of how the Anglo-Saxons perceived the oral poet, it is necessary to consider every variant in how the poet is portrayed in Old English poetry.

To add to the image of the poet described in the first chapter, this chapter shows examples that are both more ambiguous and more specific. Of the various types of representation of the oral poet within poetry, impersonal third person is the best source for details about the poet figure. The traits given to vague poet characters both reinforce the view of the poet shown by more specific representations and offer additional, more detailed, sometimes unique characteristics. First-person representation, then, provides a personal view of the poet. The self-reflexivity of the two poems I examined emphasizes the perception of the authors rather than the audiences. Yet, despite the differences between each type of representation, the different depictions of the poet all fit together

quite nicely without any opposing aspects. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the similarities stem mostly from the authors and their perceptions of oral poets or how they expected their audiences to perceive poet characters.

Many Old English poets saw the oral poet figure as a wise world traveler who entertained and taught through their performances. Sometimes they sang about heroes of the past; other times they sang about Christianity or moral values.⁶¹ Either way, they presented good memories and skill with words when composing their songs. This is how the poet figure was perceived by the poets who wrote about them. Due to the obvious connection between the authors and characters as well as the self-reflexivity of some descriptions, there must have been some resemblance between the images created by poets and the poets themselves.

⁶¹ There is evidence for both of these types of content not just in the scenes portrayed in the poems discussed but also in the poems themselves: *Beowulf* is about historical heroes; *The Order of the World* and *Vainglory* are both religious and didactic. *Widsith* is similar by being the type of poetry that the title character says he performs.

Conclusion

The poems I have discussed here are only a few of the many Old English poems that mention a singer or oral performer, so perhaps there is more to be discovered about the perception of Old English poets. Nevertheless, I have attempted to include every common distinction of how the poet is portrayed. Variants in genre, length, and type of representation make for a good amalgamation of characteristics that offers a fairly thorough image of the poet as figure in Anglo-Saxon society. The poet was a traveler. Perhaps they held a set position at times, but often they traveled to different lands and different peoples. These experiences made them worldly. They understood how the world and the people in it worked. They were not limited to one perspective. They saw and lived with myriad distinct ways of life. Poets were wise, not just from their travels but also from the knowledge they gained while learning their craft. They learned from other poets and remembered all of the important stories and legends from history. Poets were teachers. Whether on purpose or as a byproduct of their performances, poets taught their knowledge to everyone they sang for. All of these aspects made poets important members of their societal culture. However, poets were also unique and somewhat set apart from many of their peers. Their craft required a unique mind and awareness that led to skill and artistry. Not only did poets know and use an abundance of words, but they had to be able to apply those words effectively to show a deep understanding of human nature. Such artistic sensibilities made poets somewhat of a mystery to everyone else. Together, all of these qualities show not who poets actually were but how the Anglo-Saxon people saw them. Clearly, poets were revered and respected. The people appreciated their gifts

and their willingness to share them. Poetry was an important part of life, and poets were its purveyors. However, I have only presented one perspective here. While Old English poetry makes up the largest body of surviving Germanic alliterative verse, it only offers the perception of a relatively small group of people.

Unfortunately, not much evidence of the poet figure survives in other types of alliterative verse, which is mostly due to the severe lack of surviving works. The entire corpus of alliterative verse in Old High German and Old Saxon is extremely small. Old High German has fewer than 200 surviving lines within four works: the *Wessobrunn Prayer*, the *Hildebrandslied*, the *Merseburg Charms*, and *Muspilli*. Old Saxon has only two surviving alliterative poems, though one is rather long. The *Heliand* is an epic of nearly 6000 lines that reworks the four gospels into Saxon warrior culture. The other poem is *Genesis*, which only consists of 337 lines in 3 unconnected fragments. With so few surviving works, neither Old High German nor Old Saxon poetry offers enough variety to establish any one perspective as an example of societal perception. The one body of Germanic alliterative verse that does provide ample comparison to Old English poetry is Old Norse poetry. Since most Old Norse poetry is from Iceland, it generally provides evidence for ancient Icelandic perception. There is not near as much surviving verse in Old Norse as there is in Old English, but what does exist provides sufficient evidence for the similarities and differences between the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic peoples. When working solely with perception, though, it is important first to understand the differences between what gaps we are trying to fill.

The scarcity and inaccuracy of poets in Anglo-Saxon historical records creates a very clear uncertainty about what we know or assume in regard to Old English poets. Understanding Anglo-Saxon perceptions about the poet figure, then, provides us with some ideas about who poets might have been. Yet, such a method of analysis cannot easily be proved. We will likely never know who Old English poets actually were, and therefore, we will never know if perception matched reality. Still, it is important that we recognize the attitude of the Anglo-Saxon people towards poets. Doing so offers valuable information about the societal culture of the Anglo-Saxons and allows us to understand what they valued as a people. Such an obvious gap does not exist for ancient Icelandic society. In fact, the records we have of actual Icelandic oral poets are extremely vast and rarely contended. Therefore, understanding of societal perception is not necessary to uncover the Old Norse poet figure. Of course, that does not take away from the inherent value of understanding the mindset of the Icelandic people. The perception that they had of poet figures, which can undoubtedly be found within Old Norse poetry, still offers evidence of the culture's values.

From melding together different views and perspectives of the poet figure in Old English poetry, we are able to establish a set of characteristics valued in poets. We see someone who was wise and worldly and perhaps a bit mysterious. Someone who learned and taught and remembered the past. Even a cursory knowledge of Old Norse poets and poetry would suggest that the same principles applied to the Icelandic people. However, the manner in which those principles are displayed is quite different than how Old English poetry does so, which might suggest how the two cultures contrast in values and

how understanding societal perception might contribute to our current understanding of those cultures in diverse ways. Therefore, this is more of an opening than a conclusion. I have searched for the poet figure within Old English poetry in order to understand the attitude of the Anglo-Saxon people. A similar search through Old Norse poetry would surely show the mentality of the ancient Icelandic people, at least in regard to the poet figure. Only then might we understand the variants of those who composed and recited poetry in Germanic alliterative verse.

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