

Essays in Medieval Studies 13*[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]***page 81****Flytes of Fancy:
Boasting and Boasters from Beowulf to Gangsta Rap****Alta Cools Halama**

Man appears to have a deep psychological and social need to boast and to use boasting as a method of separating himself from the Other. Indeed, one can imagine that ur-man's first words might have been the equivalent of "My fire is bigger than your fire." One has only to listen to boys posturing and boasting on a playground or to athletes issuing trash-talking taunts on the playing field to discover the prevalence of what sociologists, linguists, and critics see as a mainly although not exclusively male activity.¹ Critics note that this phenomenon of flyting, the issuing of boast-words often insulting in tone, appears in cultures and literature ranging from the old Greek of Homer to the writings in Old French, Irish, and Norse; from the Middle English of Chaucer to the Scottish flyting poetry of Dunbar and Kennedie to the Renaissance poetry of Skelton to the quatrain saws of seventeenth-century England; and from Middle Eastern literature to that of seventeenth-century Japan.² Flyting appears in our adversarial law system, where opening and closing arguments by opposing counsel, with the attempts to demonize the other side, sometimes seem as much flyting as argumentation. High-level flyting operates in presidential election years. Some talk shows seem to exist solely as platforms for flyting. Occasionally academic literary criticism, where it is often not enough to prove that one's approach is valid but that it is also necessary to prove all other approaches come from the out-of-touch, tolerates flyting.³ I suggest that we also see flyting in some forms of black discourse, specifically in "sounding," the rhymed insult couplets common in black, inner-city areas; in "toasting," longer rhymed black street narratives; and in gangsta rap.

Before I discuss specific examples of flyting, I think it instructive to look at the roots and parameters of flyting. According to Bosworth-Toller, a flit is a "scandal, contention, strife"; a flitere "a brawler, wrangler, schismatic"; and flit-cr'ft "the art of disputing, logic."⁴ The common term "flyting" derives from Scottish. Within these definitions we see the genesis of Ward Parks's statement

page 82

that "[m]an, whatever else he might be, is a rhetorical creature. And, in many of his moods, a belligerent one as well. Rhetoric and belligerence meet in the verbal contest."⁵ Parks, who has written extensively on flyting, establishes two paradigms for it. Serious or "heroic" flyting is contestant-oriented (what I will do or we will do), external in its site of resolution, and inter-societal (us versus them) in context. Combat and a rhetorical setting-up of the battle are important components of serious flyting, "For even as the disputants, through their quarreling, contribute to an underlying convergence of focus that normally insists on a military resolution, they are simultaneously negotiating tacitly or explicitly the terms of this combat. Thus the martial exchange, though it can be circumvented in various ways, is what flyting is really all about."⁶ In contrast, playful or "ludic" flyting focuses on how someone seemingly akin, someone within our society (inter-societal), differs from us. Unlike heroic flyting, ludic flyting is internal in its site of resolution, with no immediate battle plan suggested or assumed.⁷

Keeping these two paradigms of heroic and ludic flyting in mind, I will first consider selected incidents of boasters and boasting in Anglo-Saxon poems as illustrative of man's strategy in positioning himself apart from the Other whether the Other is of a different class, race, gender, religion, or anyone-not-me. I will discuss, for example, how Beowulf uses flyting rhetorically to frame his heroic action vis-a-vis Unferth, the other Danes, and his first two non-human opponents. Through flyting, Beowulf will risk or invite combat while situating his Geatish forces as superior to another society, human (Danish) or wyrm. Next I will move flyting from its Old English roots to a modern context, showing a psychological resonance between the Anglo-Saxon poems, sounding, toasting, and gangsta rap. Then I will examine how the ludic flyting of sounding and toasting separates the speaker from the recipient while walking a rhetorical tightrope that seeks to differentiate without provoking combat. Finally, I will interrogate gangsta rap, which

has developed from the roots of sounding and toasting and from the roots of those roots but which differs in that gangsta rap moves back to the combat-oriented rhetorical purposes of heroic flyting. I would stress that while these four areas of inquiry Anglo-Saxon poetry, sounding, toasting, and gangsta rap may share a psychological commonality, I do not claim that the modern analogies derive from Anglo-Saxon in any literary sense.

My discussion will center on passages primarily from Beowulf, plus The Battle of Maldon, and Waldere; representative soundings; a toast version of Shine and the sinking of the Titanic as told to Langston Hughes; and gangsta raps from Public Enemy, Eazy-E, and Ice Cube.⁸ All these works present boasters and boasting that variously involve physical prowess or superiority; tell why "we" are superior to "them"; incite listeners to action, real or mythic, based on the culture's moral sense; and set out promises that may or may not realistically be carried out. In my conclusion, I will suggest both why the psychological resonance between the Anglo-Saxon and the modern works is important pedagogically and how that resonance might be used in the undergraduate college classroom⁹ to rescue Old English from the land of the dead, where too many students (and a few of our Departments) might be tempted to relegate it.

page 83

Probably the most famous heroic flyting sequence in Anglo-Saxon poetry occurs in Beowulf, lines 405-606. Characterized by Hrothgar as a warrior with "þritiges manna m'gencr'ft on his mundgripe" (379b-80), Beowulf boasts of many famous deeds undertaken in his youth and vows to purge Heorot of Grendel (408b-32). That strength of thirty men in his handgrip had allowed Beowulf to slay the water-monsters of the night (421b-22a). In the merriment of the mead-hall, the jealous Unferth declaims to the assembly that the boastful Beowulf had, in fact, been bested in a swimming contest by Breca when the two young men for dolgilpe, "for foolish boasting," allowed themselves to be tempted into deep water (506-10a). After seven nights of swimming, Breca completely fulfills his boast against Beowulf, Unferth says (516b-24). On the contrary, answers Beowulf, a flit-georn man, spoiling for a fight of honor: I swam against sea-monsters who would pull me to the bottom and killed nine of them with my sword something Breca never did although I do not boast much about it (529-86) all the while boasting. You, Unferth, are your brother's slayer, guilty of a foul deed that will damn you to hell (587-89). As for me, I shall show Grendel the strength and courage of my people (601b-3a).

Here we see several components of heroic flyting. First, the flytings revolve around the physical, rather than mental, prowess of the hero, rhetorically arguing that might makes right. Beowulf, while mentally adept enough to counter Unferth's version of history, constructs his own argument not on the Geats' brain power but on his own hand-strength because the Geats value physical superiority and depend upon physical strength: You, Unferth and, by extension, the Danish race talk; I perform, Beowulf in effect says.¹⁰ Even worse, Beowulf tells Unferth, when you do act, you do so in a dishonorable manner. The flyting replicates what we already know about Unferth and Hrothgar's society: The Danes sit around the mead-hall talking about the Grendel problem instead of doing something about it, while Beowulf and his men, Geatish strangers who have heard rumors of the trouble, brave the sea to come to the Danes' aid. In simplistic terms, Beowulf possesses the hand-strength needed to conquer not only his rival Breca but also Nature and supernatural beasts, a strength that he will require against Grendel and the other two serpents. Beowulf sets out, rhetorically, the parameters of his anticipated fight with Grendel: That contest will pit him alone against the monster in hand-to-hand combat; the next, against Grendel's mother, will replicate Beowulf's prowess in the water. Second, the flytings often incite listeners to action, if only by suggestion and example. Follow my lead, Beowulf implies not only to his own men but also to Hrothgar's society, and you can rid your land of the enemy. Third, Beowulf bases his flyting on his moral sense of what the better person in his culture would do, his sense of why he is superior to them: Breca, Unferth, the other Danes, and Grendel. The hero embeds several cultural codes in his message: The brave man fights, to the death if necessary; the honorable man answers challenges; the good man protects his brethren. We shall prevail because we are a strong, righteous race; you, whether wrym or Unferth, shall fail because you are not. Clarence Page notes, "Since tribal times, the alien has been perceived as something less than morally equiva-

page 84

lent to one's own people."¹¹ Furthermore, flyting often recapitulates the past sins of a foe, as Beowulf does in bringing up Unferth's fratricide: "A flyting would be the appropriate occasion to dredge up . . . such bits of past scandal."¹² Finally, they occur, as Parks notes, in public settings,¹³ in this case the mead-hall, with Hrothgar and his guests as

witnesses. Boasts, says Michael Murphy, are "frequently associated with drinking bouts where caution is seriously diminished."¹⁴ Realistically, Beowulf may not always prevail against the forces of evil. In fact, he falls to the third lone-walker. The honor is in trying to fulfill his boast-words.

In The Battle of Maldon, Byrhtnoth marshals his troops as the fulfillment of his boast-vow to his lord (15b-16) and answers the extortion demand of the enemy Viking messenger with a renewed boast-vow: Your only tribute from this undisgraced nobleman and his army will be spears; we shall defend our homeland, while the heathens shall fail; you shall not so easily disgrace us and win our treasure (45-61). Just as Beowulf sets out the terms of his battles in the answer to Unferth, the flytings in this poem explain the terms.¹⁵ The virtuous man, Offa tells Ælfwine while brandishing an ashwood spear, must fight

þa hwile þe he wæpen mæge
habban and healden, heardne mece,
gar and godswurd

("as long as he is able to have and hold a weapon, a hard sword, a spear and good sword," 235b-37a)

This echoes earlier boast-words that Byrhtnoth would have good courage "þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte" (14). We presume all the good warriors made the same boast-vow: Ælfere and Maccus resolutely defend against the enemy "þa hwile þe hi w&aelin;pna wealdan moston" (83); Æscferð, we are told, delivers wounds to the enemy "þa hwile ðe he wæpna wealdan moste" (272). When Godric betrays the troop and his fallen lord, Ælfwine reminds the men they had boasted at the mead-bench that they would act bravely (211-14), an exhortation echoed by Offa (230-37a), Leofsunu (244-53a), and Dunnere (255-59). Eadweard, too, boasts he will not flee a foot's pace when his lord lies dead (273-76). The old retainer, Byrhtwold, boasts that as their strength wanes, their courage shall be fiercer, the heart keener, and the spirit greater (309-13). Here the public boasts take place on the battlefield, moving the rhetoric right to the site of action. The cultural codes of the Maldon flytings revolve around the sense of honor and duty: personal honor in fighting even if the battle is lost, and the duty to uphold one's lord, one's country, and one's companions.

Parks sees a further component of heroic flyting in the second fragment of Waldere, the taunting challenge to the enemy, Guthhere, by the hero to try to capture the hero's armor: "Feta, gyf ðu dyrre, þæt ðus hea ðuwerigan hare byrnan" ("Snatch, if you dare, the hoary corslet from this battle-wearied one," II.16b-17). In the modern parlance of Clint Eastwood, Waldere, holding his battle-bill (guðbilla), his comfort-in-war (hildefrefre), suggests to the Burgundian lord: Come on; make my day. "The passage as a whole corroborates my speculation . . . that armor stripping may be integral to the Old English flyting-fighting con-

page 85

test, as it plainly is to the Iliadic," Parks notes.¹⁶ I would add that gangsta rap updates that armor- and sword-stripping: The desire to strip the guns work of Smith & Wesson or Colt instead of Weland or another armorer from the police runs through much of the gangsta-rap genre.

Thus far I have dealt only with heroic flyting. What Parks terms "ludic" or playful flyting, in contrast, is not intended to lead to combat nor to be seen as presenting boasts of literal truth.¹⁷ Murphy, in tracing playful flyting to Dunbar's poetry, says that this "late medieval or Renaissance game . . . combines boasting, vowing and taunting all in one."¹⁸ In modern terms, the ludic form of flyting finds expression in two separate, but related, modes of black discourse: sounding and toasting. The first, a ritualized exchanging of rhymed couplets, is variously called "playing the dozens," a generic, older African-American phrase dating back to slavery and reappearing in the context of the blues;¹⁹ "sounding" in New York and Philadelphia; "woofing" in Philadelphia; "joining" in Washington, D.C.; "signifying" in Chicago; "screaming" in Harrisburg, PA; or "cutting" / "capping" / "chopping" on the West Coast.²⁰ In "sounds," Speaker A opens with a taunting couplet; Speaker B takes the couplet, uses the first line or some variation and supplies a new second line. The pattern continues until all the sounders have had their say or until the group tires of the game. Page points out that "[t]he thrill of the game comes from taking one's opponent close to the edge of the tolerable insult."²¹ "Toasting," in contrast to the shorter rhymed-couplet taunts of soundings, presents a longer, rhymed folklore narrative which is more overtly boastful than taunting in tone.

Sounding and toasting share common roots and exist primarily in lower-economic-strata, inner-city settings. The us-versus-them battle here occurs explicitly along class, race, and gender lines. The black male, Roger D. Abrahams

reminds us, "is not only a black man in a white man's world, but he is a male in this matrifocally oriented group. And of these, the latter is his greatest burden. . . . Significant . . . is the absolute and divisive distrust which members of one sex have for the other."²² Page puts the battle in more streetwise terms: "There never was a black man born who wasn't afraid of his mama."²³ Thus sounding levelling a boast-insult against a relative in a ritual, formulaic manner usually involves trash-talk about the listener's mother.²⁴ For example, William Labov reports the following as a common, effective sounding:

Iron is iron, and steel don't rust,

But your momma got a pussy like a Greyhound Bus.²⁵

Three considerations must be noted in this ludic flyting. First, because a sounding is not meant to be taken as literal attributes of the sounding object or his family, the talk does not aim to provoke a fight.²⁶ The sounder and listeners all know that your mother's genitals do not resemble a bus; however, all recognize that the slur on women in general (the enemy Other) reflects a male view of

page 86

woman's immorality: Women use their genitals in sexual commerce. If, on the other hand, the sounding crosses group lines trans-racial or outside the neighborhood group or gang it can be intended or taken as fight-provoking.²⁷

The sounding slurs against women do not always have to be gender-specific or even as scatological as Labov's example. Page reports the following two soundings, where one could substitute any Other, of any race, gender, or ethnic group: "Yo' mama's so fat she got her own area code," or Yo' mama's so stupid she goes to the library to get a book of matches."²⁸

Second, soundings commonly incorporate current brand names or mass media figures as cultural touchstones: Labov, who began his study in 1965, cites Applejacks, Bosco, Dog Yummies, Flipper, and James Bond as typical names.²⁹ For example, a sounding might include: "Yo' momma eat Dog Yummies," a non-scatological sounding that not only brings in the world of commerce but also implies that the mother is a bitch, incorporating the meanings of animal, immoral, domineering, and unpleasant. Due to the commercial mentions, one can often date some soundings from these internal clues. Toastings may or may not bring in a cultural item. In the Hughes version of the Titanic story, a specific newspaper is mentioned by name. In some other versions, when Shine begins drinking, a brand may be named. We do not see the brand names used in Anglo-Saxon poetry in quite the same off-handed manner that we see them incorporated into sounding and toasting: There is no "Beowulf gets his strength from Brand-X mead" or "The Danes could fight better after a cup of X," for example. However, both Beowulf's sword Nægling, nail-studded; with the implication hard-as-nails? and Unferth's sword Hrunting, hilted, reminding us of the runes on a sword-haft become, in a sense, brand names with attributes attached to their naming. Swords made by Weland, a well-respected craftsman of Old Germanic mythology and thus a brand-name with considerable cachet, receive mention in both Waldere (I.2) and Beowulf (455a).

Third, while soundings, and to a lesser extent toastings, might appear obscene to an outsider and are a conscious playing off against middle-class sensibilities, a phenomenon which we shall see recurs in gangsta rap the "obscene" words have become so familiar and so ritualized to the immediate listening audience that the words have lost the power to shock.³⁰ Indeed, whether the obscenities have the power to shock anyone, inside or outside the immediate culture of these three genres, becomes an interesting, if perhaps disturbing, question.

Labov points to another connection between sounding and toasting: "[Both] derive their meaning from the opposition between two major sets of values: their way of being good' and our way of being bad,"³¹ an attention to competing value systems that the Anglo-Saxon battle poems present in earnest, not ludic, terms. The ludic societal values in toasting operate in versions of a story about Shine (a racial epithet once applied to African-American males), a mythic stoker on the Titanic. This toast exists in many permutations. The complete text of the version told to Hughes in 1956 reads:

Shine, old cullod boy blacker than me,

Worked the wrong boat in the wrong sea.

Old Titanic hit a iceberg block,

page 87

Shook and shimmied and reared from shock.
Shine come up from the engine floor
Running so fast he broke down an iron door.
Captain told Shine, "Get on back downstairs!"
Shine told the captain, "You better say your prayers."
Captain's daughter hollered, "Lord, the water's up to my neck."
Shine said, "Baby, you better swim, by heck!"
Captain said, "Boy, I got pumps to pump the water down."
Shine said, "Pump on but I won't be around."
Shine jumped overboard into the sea,
Looked back at the white folks and said, "Swim like me."
And he swam on.
Captain's daughter hid her dress over her head.
Shine said, "You'll catch pneumonia, baby, and be stone-cold dead."
And he swam on.
Captain's daughter yelled, "Shine, Shine, save poor me,
And I'll give everything your eyes can see."
Shine said, "There's plenty on land, baby, waiting for me."
And he swam on.
Captain yelled, "Shine, my boy, I got a bank account.
Save poor me and you'll get any amount."
Shine said, "More banks on land than there is on sea."
And he swam on.
Old millionaire, age seventy-five,
Titanic deck yelling, "I want to stay alive. Shine,
Shine, hear my plea!"
Shine said, "Jump in the water, Grandpa, and swim like me."
And Shine swam on.
Five o'clock in the morning in Harlem and daybreak near,
Shine said, "How come they close up these bars so early when Shine just got here?"
And he walked on.
Newsstand on the corner, bought the Daily News.
Nothing on the front page but Titanic Blues.
He walked on.
Got to his girl friend's house,
She cried, "How can it be?"
Shine said, "Yes, baby it's me."
And they carried on.³²

The basic narratives all tell of a stoker who tries to warn the captain that the ship is sinking but is rebuffed with a reminder of the number of pumps the liner carries, a number that can change with different narrative versions and within a

page 88

version: Neither literal truth nor internal consistency is the point of the toast. Only after Shine jumps overboard does the captain realize his stoker was telling the truth. Shine then refuses bribes of money from the captain and/or rich white male passengers and spurns offers of sex from the captain's daughter, offers all made to induce Shine to save the bribers. The stoker successfully swims to shore and gets drunk or has sexual intercourse as the passengers perish. A commonplace of most of the versions absent from Hughes's more poetic formulation ³³ is the fiction that Shine can not only outswim the shark but also reach land before the ship sinks. Shine assuredly has "ritiges manna mægencreaft on his mundgripe!"

Worth noting, as Hughes points out in his headnote to Shine and the Titanic, is that blacks believed they were excluded from the ship as passengers and as servants: Survival is Shine's revenge. He is an "old cullod boy blacker

than me / Worked the wrong boat in the wrong sea," at a time when the darkness of one's skin indicated the degree of "badness" or "lowliness" or Other-ness in the black community, much as it did in the white community. Captain, a man with as much ofermod as Byrhtnoth, dooms his passengers by refusing to accept the warnings of a black man. That refusal by whites to accept warnings of impending doom from blacks informs much of gangsta rap, as I will show later. (Note also that Shine generally uses the same thumping, doggeral rhythm present in gangsta rap.) Shine throws taunts to the passengers: "Swim like me" and "Jump in the water, Grandpa, and swim like me," knowing that the people being taunted cannot perform.

Embedded in the Titanic poems is the message that not only must Shine escape from the world of the rich whites to survive but that he can find his own wealth and own women apart from that community:

Captain's daughter hist her dress over her head.

Shine said, "You'll catch pewmonia, baby, and be stone-cold dead."

And he swimmmed on.

Captain's daughter yelled, "Shine, Shine, save poor me,

And I'll give everything your eyes can see."

Shine said, "There's plenty on land, baby, waiting for me."

Shine, by leaving the ship, sends a clear message to the toaster's audience: Disobey the white man's rule and live; stand by the white man and die.

Although Shine and the Titanic and Beowulf exist at opposite ends of Parks's ludic-heroic flyting scale, the two works do share some common world views in terms of class, race, and gender. The Shine poets position the stoker as a working-class man who tries, unsuccessfully, to warn his superiors, the powerful Captain and the old millionaire the establishment of danger. Part of the ludic, if not ironic, sense of Shine rests on the audience's knowledge that what happens in the poem is unlikely to happen in real life: If Shine had been on the historic Titanic, he would undoubtedly have gone down with the other stokers, and with the Astors. The "class" differences in Beowulf split along age, not economic, lines, with the young Geat coming to teach the older Hrothgar and his court the establishment world of the poem about heroism and honor. The race issue

page 89

in Shine exists on a black-white axis, in Beowulf on a heathen-Christian axis. The presumed Other (black, heathen) turns out, at least in the short term, to be the dominant race within both poems. I say presumed Other because which side is Other becomes tricky. With Shine aimed at a black audience, at first glance the Other should be the white man. However, the poem cannot ever overcome the actual-world reality of the black man as Other outside the poem. Nor does it ever leave our consciousness that the pre-Christian Beowulf, his Geats, and the ancient Danes are all outsiders to a modern audience: Where Beowulf carefully separates his superior Geats from the Danish race, the twentieth-century reader tends to blur the differences into amorphous heathen Scandinavians versus modern Christian ideals.

Gender roles become equally problematized in both the toasting and the Anglo-Saxon epic. For Shine, the two women he encounters, Captain's daughter and his own girlfriend, are inferior. Each nameless woman is a "baby" to be rejected (Captain's daughter) or used (the girlfriend) as he sees fit for sexual pleasure. In Beowulf, most of the women also gain value for what they can provide to the men: serving drink in the mead-hall and providing sons (Wealtheow); mourning for or weeping over the dead warriors (Hildeburh); being married off as a peace-weaver (Freawaru); and showing how a woman can be tamed by her husband (Modthryth). Grendel's nameless mother represents a strong, independent woman, although not one strong enough to overcome the heroic Beowulf. However, not only is Grendel's mother unhuman and permanently situated in her son's shadow by virtue of her namelessness, but descriptions of her also emphasize that she enjoys success because she uses the masculine skills of stealth and power. She is, as Alexandra Hennessey Olsen points out, a wrecend (1256b) and a secg (1379a),³⁴ a "manly" woman of galg-mod (1277a), angry, bent for a warrior's revenge, and a foreshadower of Beowulf's words that "selre bið æghwæm / æt he his freond wrece, onne he fela murne" ("It is better for every man that he avenge his friend than mourn too much," 1384b-85).

While it might seem somewhat of a stretch to call the toasters modern scop, the narrators of the Titanic, Stackolee, and Signifying Monkey stories ³⁵ do possess the scop's "quickly apprehensive and retentive memory," attention to "original composition," and position as historian preserving "the great deeds, the great events of his time."³⁶ Each toaster embellishes or changes the basic story for the maximum enjoyment of his audience and as a way of showing off

his art.³⁷ In Hughes's version of the Titanic story, as befits a poet, the toaster employs a ritualistic repetition of certain phrases as evocative and formulaic as the Maldon poet's " a hwile e he mid handum healdan mihte." Shine looks back on the ship, "And he swam on"; he denies the woman once, "And he swam on"; denies her again, "And he swam on"; refuses the captain's money, "And he swam on"; refuses the rich man's money, "And Shine swam on"; reaches Harlem, "And he walked on"; buys a newspaper, "He walked on"; finally reunites with his girl, "And they carried on." We must also realize that the toaster's audience, like the scop's, hears the story. Both cultures, old and new, are oral-centered. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the meter of

page 90

the Anglo-Saxon poems, I would like to note that the soundings, toasts, and gangsta rap all share a rhyme scheme as regular as that of the Anglo-Saxon poems, part of the speakers' memory aids.³⁸

Soundings and toasts are performed without musical accompaniment. Rhythmic harp strums, we assume, accompanied the oral presentations of the Anglo-Saxon scop's art. Our final genre, gangsta rap, features rhythmic chanting; the musical accompaniment, if any is present, comes from guitar and/or drum. Gangsta rap may or may not contain the rhymed couplets common in soundings and likely in toasts; it may use internal rhyme or occasionally head-rhyme. The rap incorporates the explicit insult language of the sounding and the narrative impulse of the toast. However, we can differentiate gangsta rap from sounding and toasting in one very important way: With gangsta rap, we move back into the serious, battle-oriented, fight-provoking flyting we see in the Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The themes of gangsta rap are simple and simplistic: Every policeman is a pig; every woman a bitch or "ho"; the white man, another oppressor of blacks, must die because the white man has not learned the lessons of history. "Laced throughout the songs of gangsta rap's most popular artists," Linda M. Harrington says, "are . . . references to suicide, cop killing, gangbangers and necrophilia."³⁹ In terms of Parks's paradigm, gangsta rap is contestant-oriented and external in its site of resolution. However, the rap's context can be either inter-societal or intra-societal. Parks, in his discussion of the Iliad, points out that "since the heroes of epic . . . are not always entirely socialized creatures, the possibility emerges of flyting between members of a single community," an intra-societal event that "invokes the spectacle of disunion and social schism."⁴⁰ When Eazy-E trashes fellow black rappers for being too "white" and predicts their demise (death of their songs? death of the rappers?), the context becomes intra-societal. The acceptance or even active encouragement of drug use in the black community by the gangsta rappers positions the context as intra-societal. Urging the killing of black policemen makes the context intra-societal, although a case could be made that the gangsta rappers consider black police as much the Other as the gangsta rappers consider the white police. Despair, rage, and hatred inner- and outer-oriented define much of gangsta rap, whose writers Page traces to the "loud, lazy, godless, shiftless, doo-rag wearing good-for-nothings" against whom every black mother warned her children: "Today those same figures in the persons of gangsta rappers are exalted in the new ghetto romanticism."⁴¹ I will use selected lyrics from three groups to explore flyting in the music.⁴²

Public Enemy represents the softest end of gangsta rap, considerably less scatological, misogynistic, and explicitly kill-oriented than many other groups. I would point out here a major difference in focus between the three modern genres especially gangsta rap which are to varying degrees openly and aggressively misogynistic, and the Anglo-Saxon poems, where women are not so much overtly insulted as ignored or marginalized. In "Welcome to the Terrordome," Public Enemy acknowledges that bad comes in all colors:

page 91

Every brother ain't a brother
Cause a Black hand
Squeezed on Malcolm X the man.

The message is mixed between taking responsibility for one's fate instead of being weak and blaming others; finding the socially acceptable outlet of writing out one's anger on paper (the ancient warriors would write it in runes on a sword-hilt); and striking out in aggression. Public Enemy's cut "Burn Hollywood Burn" turns up the heat, though. The narrative of the song begins with a riot and burning. The narrator, instead of listening to the riot on TV, wants to rent some videos, but the only black characters he can find in movies are maids and butlers of the Steppan Fetchit type, the latter character cleverly worked into the rap ("So step and fetch"). Hollywood, guilty of burning the black image, now finds itself on fire:

For all the years we looked like clowns
The joke is over smell the smoke from all around
Burn Hollywood Burn

The song was written prior to the Rodney King beating trial and the ensuing Los Angeles riot. While I do not construe any correspondence between the song and a later riot, the implicit message does come through that the white man's past sins against the black race will reap a bitter legacy. The white man's wergild, if you will, for not providing jobs and respect to the black community will be a fire-storm.

With Eazy-E and Ice Cube, the fire simmering in Public Enemy's music bursts into full flame. Their messages, verbal billboard ads for the baddest dudes in town, are as explicit as Byrhtnoth's to the Vikings: We shall repay you with death. Eazy-E's "Any Last Werdz?" opens with the consequences of years of abuse of blacks by the police:

1999 The world is at its end
Fuck We want the money and the power
And go out with a bang

The rap then moves back into history to show, from the police point of view, how the authorities hunt blacks. An intermittent chorus of "Wet em up" slang for wetting with blood, but also containing a heavy sexual connotation from the way the phrase is generally used in raps about women drives the rap: "I'm looking for a victim," Eazy-E boasts, taunting us that he has found one. In the context of the rap, the song's final couplet comes in the voice not only of a white policeman hunting for a black to kill but also of a black hunting a white policeman to kill.

Ice Cube, one of the most popular rappers, sets his agenda on his album liner notes in a statement that incorporates flyting of its own. He sarcastically "wishes to acknowledge" how the white power system has a "continued commitment to the silence and oppression of black men" through inadequate schools and the schools' suppression of black history and black contributions to society. In addi-

page 92

tion, he excoriates the police "for their systematic and brutal killings of brothers all over the country." The black race, he says, has been consciously made the Other, eliminated from the dialogue of America, undereducated, left oppressed and unacknowledged. The choice is clear: White America must stop oppressing and ignoring blacks or suffer the consequences: "cause you know what happens when we stop" talking. The question arises, of course, about the tricky subject of intentionality. Do the raps mean to propel action? To instigate fighting back? Or do they present a point of view as a basis for discussion? Those questions are what make the genre so controversial.

Ice Cube's "When Will They Shoot?" opens with a police search, followed by a phrase dealing with bloody hands, leaving us to wonder if the bloody hands come from his body or the white man's body. Later in the song, he wonders what whites, who killed President Kennedy, one of their own, would do to Ice Cube, the outsider. Gunfire is heard, although the shooter misses the "Gorillas [guerrillas?] in the mist." His "Gorillas in the mist" is an interesting phrase. First, it presupposes a certain level of culture and familiarity with the movie by the same name. It plays off the racial slur by whites that blacks are lower, if more dangerous, primates. Further, its homonym, guerrillas, sets the terms of battle, guerrilla warfare between the races:

Give a trigger to a nigger
And watch him pull it.

Ice Cube introduces "Say Hi to the Bad Guy" with excerpts from a speech by Minister Louis Farrakhan, a speech which contends that racism in America, because covert, is worse than the overt racism in South Africa. The rap begins with the bad guys Ice Cube and his people taking over the city: If you want the city back, send in the troops. A new era has come to this new "Heorot" city. Indeed, the rap could almost come from Grendel's mouth although Ice Cube may perhaps see himself as Beowulf, ridding his race of the oppressive police force. The rap ends with a black man shooting a doughnut-seeking policeman and a white voice screaming at the cop killer.

As noted earlier, women do not commonly indulge in flyting in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, in soundings, in toasting, nor in gangsta rap. The few female fliteres the heroic Judith in Anglo-Saxon poetry, the female narrator of the ludic Sergeant Jerk, and Sister Souljah,[43](#) for example appear to boast only in the context of a woman acting as a man, especially as a man-in-war.[44](#) Even here the terms of the flyting reflect that the women cannot be as effective as men.

In Judith, the heroine needs the intervention of God to be successful. In addition, her main success is not in leading the Hebrews to defeat the Assyrians, a victory ordained by God, but in preserving with God's help her chastity against the drink-weakened Holofernes. Whereas a Beowulf or a Byrhtnoth can inspire men to follow the hero into a battle whose outcome is unknown, Judith must reassure her troops that God has guaranteed victory. In Sergeant Jerk, the woman rules her husband, but only within their house: He can always escape back to his command, where he rules troops that cannot escape.

page 93

Earlier I suggested that an understanding of the psychological resonance that sounding, toasting, and gangsta rap have within the context of Old English flyting has a pedagogical importance. Certainly it is not unusual to compare Anglo-Saxon poems with works from another language or another era; many analogies between Beowulf and other literature concentrate on a correlation between the Anglo-Saxon poem and the Greek epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Another body of criticism shows how Beowulf belongs in the same oral-formulaic tradition as middle-European return songs, Norse sagas, middle-Eastern songs, or English ballads. I believe that all these analogies and comparisons while very valid scholarship unfortunately serve to distance the average college undergraduate from Old English and operate to make the study of Anglo-Saxon poems seem an arcane field of effete studies, a field with no connection to their lives or interests.

In contrast, several essays in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf* suggest ways to contextualize and modernize some Beowulfian themes and characters. For example, Bernice W. Kliman brings into her classroom New York Times cartoons and articles on monsters as a way to relate the past to the present.⁴⁵ Diana M. DeLuca, who teaches in Hawaii, incorporates early Hawaiian history and society as a comparison to Beowulf. In classroom discussions of kennings, DeLuca points out such modern equivalents as "gas guzzler" and notes that "Hawaiian chants use many common oral-tradition techniques."⁴⁶ In his delightful essay on how to instill in students a desire to learn about words and word origins, Stephen A. Barney issues a powerful challenge to teachers: "[T]he teacher must be bold, must allow a wild profusion of materials to ensnare the diverse intransigencies of the customers,"⁴⁷ the students.

I would suggest using the flyting in the three modern genres of sounding, toasting, and gangsta rap as a way of speaking two languages, to use Allen J. Frantzen's term, as a way of getting closer to our students' experience and interest, and as a way of opening up the language, rhyme, and meter of the Anglo-Saxon writers to our students. I suggest looking at the newer genres as prefatory material to set up the idea that culture affects literature and literature affects culture. Such a discussion makes us and our students confront a series of questions. Who is the audience? What assumptions does the audience bring to a work? What strategies does the author use to set up the divisions of class, race, and gender in a work? What strategies does the author employ to constitute class, race, or gender markers? What group(s) does the author position as the dominant one(s)? What cultures or groups disappear into the background? Such a genre comparison, approaching the unknown from the known, could not only bring multi-culturalism into Old English studies but also move Old English study into multi-culturalism. When my students see Beowulf so carefully separate the superior Geats from the lesser Danes, I hope those students hear the words of Clarence Page: Racism is the belief or practice that devalues other races as biologically and morally inferior. . . . It has been called America's original sin. It is.

page 93

But it was not invented here. . . . Its roots can be found in the very concept of group identity itself, dating to the cradles of tribal organization, in the xenophobic impulses that showed themselves with humanity's earliest declarations of "us" and "them," "our people" and the "other."⁴⁸

I do not suggest that an examination of black discourse modes offers the only approach to the discourse of the Anglo-Saxon poets. I do, however, suggest that approaching the unknown from the more-known might be an efficient, informative, and engaging approach for my students. We, as teachers, recognize that Anglo-Saxon poetry has a message for today. Our challenge is in ensuring that our students recognize that enduring relevance.

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 94

Notes

1. See Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Hatboro, PA, 1964), p. 109; and Ward Parks, *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English Traditions* (Princeton, 1990), p. 179.
2. Re Homer, Old French, Irish, and Norse, see Michael Murphy, "Vows, Boasts and Taunts, and the Role of Women in Some Medieval Literature," *English Studies* 66 (1985), 105-12, at 106-7. On Scottish, see Murphy, "Vows, Boasts and Taunts," p. 106, and Ward Parks, "Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986), 439-58, at 441. On Skelton, see Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 103-35. On quatrain saws, see Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, p. 108, note 11. On the Middle East, see Francelia Clark, "Flyting in Beowulf and Rebuke in The Song of Bagdad: The Question of Theme," *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. John Miley Foley (Columbus, 1981), pp. 164-93. On seventeenth-century Japan, see Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, p. 163.
3. Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, pp. 181, 184.
4. Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1898), Supplement by T. Northcote Toller (London, 1921), Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda by Alistair Campbell (Oxford, 1972), s.vv.
5. Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, p. 179.
6. Ward Parks, "Flyting and Fighting: Pathways in the Realization of the Epic Contest," *Neophilologus* 70 (1986), 292-306, at 292.
7. Parks, "Flyting, Sounding, Debate," pp. 445-55.
8. The *Beowulf* passages are taken from Klaeber's 3rd edition (Lexington, MA, 1950), *Maldon* and *Waldere* from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *ASPR* 6 (New York, 1942); I use line citations for these. All translations are my own. Shine and the Titanic can

be found in Langston Hughes, *The Book of Negro Humor* (New York, 1966), pp. 91-92.

9. Because of various obstacles parents and administrators, to name two powerful ones the gangsta rap material would be inappropriate for use in a **page 95**

high-school class, although the toastings and non-scatological soundings could be used in a high-school course.

10. Howell D. Chickering, Jr., in *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York, 1977), p. 300, connects this corrective-cum-boasting with a similar incident in Book 8 of the *Odyssey* and its insult quarrel between Odysseus and Euryalus.

11. Clarence Page, *Showing My Color: Impolite Essays on Race and Identity* (New York, 1996), p. 80.

12. Edward B. Irving, Jr., *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 42.

13. Parks, "Flyting, Sounding, Debate," p. 441.

14. Murphy, "Vows, Boasts and Taunts," p. 106.

15. Christopher Ball, "Byrhtnoth's Weapons," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 36 (1989), 8-9, at 9. 16. Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, p. 68.

17. Parks, "Flyting, Sounding, Debate," p. 441.

18. Murphy, "Vows, Boasts and Taunts," p. 106.

19. Dan Burley, "The Dirty Dozen," *The Citizen Call*, 30 July, 1960, in Hughes, *The Book of Negro Humor*, pp. 119-21, at 120-21. According to Burley, black field hands used the verbal assault of "The Dozens" against the favored house slaves in lieu of physical attack. The name "Dozens," he says, became attached to the practice of vilifying one's relatives and ancestors when an anonymous "blues pianist and singer composed an uncopyrighted tune called The Dirty Dozen,' complete with words, which because of their very nature never got on paper. But at barrel-house and buffet flat-house rent parties The Dirty Dozens' became the rage" (pp. 120-21). Abrahams says various researchers have suggested the name may refer to: twelve scatological rhymes mothers used; unlucky twelve in craps; a corruption of "doesn't" ("at least my mother doesn't"); or from eighteenth-century definitions of "dozen" meaning "to stun, stupefy, daze" (*Deep Down in the South*, pp. 49-50, note 5).

20. William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 306-7. A new, non-rhymed, non-couplet form of flyting has lately gained currency with young people and athletes: dissing (from dis-respecting), which crosses racial boundaries.

21. Page, *Showing My Color*, p. 4.

22. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, p. 31.

23. Page, *Showing My Color*, p. 104.

24. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 307.

25. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 308.

26. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 352.

27. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 341.

28. Page, *Showing My Color*, p. 137. The phrase starting "Yo' momma . . ." has become so common in sounding that currently "yo' momma" stands by itself as an insult: We both know, the speaker implies, that your mother is inferior to us, but we don't have time to start sounding.

29. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 323.

page 96

30. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, p. 324.

31. Labov, *Language of the Inner City*, p. 324.

32. Hughes, *The Book of Negro Humor*, pp. 91-92. For another version, see "The Titanic" Toast 1B by "Kid" in Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, p. 119.

33. He reports only that "[t]his is a Harlem variant" as told to him "on Eighth Avenue, 1956" (*The Book of Negro Humor*, p. 91). Although Hughes does not claim to have reworked the material, one can see a poet's hand at some points.

34. See Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Women in Beowulf," *Approaches to Teaching "Beowulf"*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr. and Robert F. Yeager (New York, 1984), pp. 150-56, at 153.

35. See Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, pp. 123-57, for versions of the latter two.

36. L. F. Anderson, *The Anglo-Saxon Scop* (n.p., 1903), pp. 21-23.

37. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, p. 102.

38. For those who wish to pursue the versification of toasting, see Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, pp. 99-103.

39. Linda M. Harrington, "On Capitol Hill, a real rap session," *Chicago Tribune*, Fox Valley ed., 24 Feb. 1994, pp. 1, 18, at 18.

40. Parks, "Flyting and Fighting," 301-2.

41. Page, *Showing My Color*, p. 59.

42. In order of usage: Public Enemy, "Welcome to the Terrordome" and "Burn Hollywood Burn," prod. Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (CBS Records, AAD 45413, 1989); Eazy-E, "Any Last Werdz?," prod. Eazy-Muthafucka-E, *It's on* (Dr. Dre) 187UMKilla (Ruthless Records, 88561-5503-Z, n.d.); Ice Cube, "Jacket Notes," "When Will They Shoot," and "Say Hi to the Bad Guy," prod. Ice Cube, *The Predator* (Priority Records, P2 57185, 1992). Neither Eazy-E nor Ice Cube provides lyric sheets. Therefore, the line divisions and spelling of the words are my own approximation.

43. See Deborah Fuller Wess, in Hughes, *The Book of Negro Humor*, p. 158.

44. See Allen J. Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 445-71, for an informative discussion of gender construction in Anglo-Saxon hagiography. Although Frantzen does not touch on Judith, what he says regarding AElfric's homilies applies: "[W]omen can be saved only by becoming like men . . . [T]he woman earns salvation by acquiring a man's nature" (p. 464).

45. See Bernice W. Kliman, "Teaching Beowulf in Translation to Undergraduates," in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, ed. Bessinger and Yeager, pp. 61-64.

46. Diana M. DeLuca, "Teaching Beowulf in Translation to Undergraduates," in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, ed. Bessinger and Yeager, pp. 68-70, at 70.
47. Stephen A. Barney, "The Words," in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, ed. Bessinger and Yeager, pp. 162-72, at 167.
48. Page, *Showing My Color*, p. 77.