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*Lyric, Meaning, and Audience in the Oral Tradition of
Northern Europe* (review)

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LYRIC, MEANING, AND AUDIENCE IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF NORTHERN EUROPE.

By Thomas A. DuBois. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 268; 1 illustration. \$30.

The title of this erudite book should not mislead the reader. DuBois examined the reception of various small forms in Northern Europe, but never asked what is lyric poetry. The seven chapters of the book are as follows. 1. "Introduction: Lyrics and the Issue of Meaning." 2. "Pausing in a Narrative's March: The Interpretation of Lyrics within Epics." In it DuBois looks at laments embedded in larger narratives: *Guðrúnarqviða* (the so-called *First Lay of Guðrún*), *Sonatorrek* (Egill Skallagrímsson's dirge composed after the death of his son), the Hrethel digression in *Beowulf* (an old father mourns the death of his son shot accidentally by his other son), and two Old English elegies: *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. 3. "The Ritual and Wit: The Hermeneutics of the Invocational Lyric." This chapter is devoted to Sámi *joik* ("... a way of recalling other folk; some are remembered with hate, some with love and some with sorrow. And often these songs concern certain places, or animals: the wolf, and the reindeer, and the wild reindeer"; Petrus Laestadius, a nineteenth-century Sámi missionary, p. 67), shepherds' calls and charms (Scandinavian), charms (Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Karelian, Scottish Gaelic, and Old English), laments in funerals and weddings (Irish, Finnish), and *piobaireachd* (Scottish bagpipe performances).

4. "Conversing with God: Medieval Religious Lyric and Its Interpretation." The chapter is divided into the following sections: "The Liturgical Roots of Hymnody," "Saints' Hymns and Narratives"; "From Latin to Vernacular Hymns": Latin, Irish, Old English (*Cædmon's Hymn*, *Bede's Death Song*, Cynewulf's invocation in *Christ I* and a section from *Dream of the Rood*), Welsh and Old Icelandic (a hymn to St. Olaf), "The Arrival of Contemplation" (penitential poetry in Old English, Welsh, Middle English, Early Modern English, and Latin). 5. "Confronting Convention: Reading Reception in Shakespeare's Use of Lyric Song" ("Valorizing Convention from the Compositional Side," "Expectations of the Outside Audience," "Expectations of the Inside Audience," "The Performer's Role," and "When Identification Goes Awry"). 6. "Attribution and the Imagined Performer" ("Attribution in the Celtic Lyric Tradition" ["Medieval texts from Ireland and Wales frequently include accounts of artful and revered poet-singers who use their poetry to praise, remember, and influence kings and nobles," p. 170], "Carolun" [the life and fortunes of an Irish itinerant musician-poet, born in 1670], "Carl Michael Bellman and the Minstrelsy of the North" [Bellman, 1740–95; Anthony Raftery, 1779–1835, Irish; and Kreeta Haapasalo [1813–93; Finnish]). 7. "Personal Meanings in the Performance of One Man's Repertoire" (on Michael Lyme, Irish, DuBois's great-uncle; after a biographical sketch, accompanied by a photo of the performer and his wife, DuBois speaks about lyrics as emblems of belonging, lyrics as narratives of displacement, and lyrics and the master narrative of Ireland). The book ends with a short epilogue (pp. 243–44), a few notes, an extensive bibliography, and an index (names and subjects).

This book is an unhurried guided tour of several traditions. The texts in at least nine languages, often with the music that goes with them, are given in the original and English translation. However, DuBois could not confine himself to presenting his material: he needed "theory." Theoretical questions confront students of North-European folklore and old literary texts at every step. Among them are the role of authorship and improvisation in oral tradition, the limits of anonymity, the

interaction of fixed texts in Latin with folklore, and the formulaic nature of both. In the subject chosen by DuBois, the rise of lyric poetry is of special interest. He is aware of those questions, except perhaps the last (only once, while speaking about Bede's account of Cædmon, he admits that this is not lyric poetry, p. 117), but it is more important for him to appear equipped with the apparatus of modern cultural studies. Hence the frequent use of words like *hermeneutics* and *valorizing* and the accent on models.

DuBois proposes to analyze the meaning of songs along three interpretative axes. The generic axis serves as the key to "[a] song's details, potentially startling or novel to a listener from outside of the tradition"; those details "become familiar and easily comprehended by an audience knowledgeable in the genre as a whole. . . . An audience listens to any new performance from within a set of locally and historically shaped 'generic' expectations, shaped by past performances and a tradition of interpretation in the locale" (thus, a song may contain clues to those who are not acquainted with the scene). "Along the second axis, the associative, interpretation depends on associating the song with a particular person, place, or thing. . . . In personalization, one sees a song in relation to one's own life and experiences, or remembers the personal moments in which the song played a part. . . ." (in other words, one may feel the song as one's own). Finally, there is a situational axis: "a song becomes meaningful through reference to its inscribed situation, be it described narratively (as something that has occurred to a specific individual at a certain place and time) or proverbially (as something that typically happens to people in certain common situations, e. g., separation from a lover, an unhappy marriage, the state of orphanhood)" (pp. 2–3). This is called a typology of interpretative strategies. None of what DuBois says about those strategies is controversial: while listening to a song, some people are drawn into a tradition new to them, others recognize themselves in what they hear, and still others are moved by a description of a unique or typical situation. Naturally, these factors may appear in any combination, even though scholars, in their analyses, tend to emphasize one at the expense of the others. The model is not particularly original or revealing.

This book, like any other, should be evaluated according to what is novel and non-trivial in it. The theoretical framework made so much of by DuBois is a dispensable envelope. I cannot judge the Celtic and Balto-Finnish sections, but in the sections dealing with Medieval Latin, Old English, and Old Icelandic poetry I found nothing that I did not know before. However, having so much comparative material under one cover is no small merit, and from this point of view the book will be of use to students of oral literature and its offshoots. In his ability to read and enjoy texts in so many extremely difficult languages DuBois may have no rivals.

By way of conclusion, here are a few quibbles expected from a reviewer. On p. 39 DuBois mentions "spontaneous improvised laments, often performed by women during the funeral ritual and seldom remembered word-for-word thereafter." Such laments have been attested in many countries, but since they are always heavily formulaic, their spontaneity seems to be of little significance. While confronting a collector of songs, young Finnish women were loath to reveal their identity for fear of being equated with the lyric speaker and avoided singing such songs to a man. DuBois adds: "Porthan [i.e., Henrik Gabriel Porthan, who transcribed many such songs] does not appear to have asked his informants what they thought about the matter" (p. 18). I wonder what they would have said if asked such a question.

Love songs in folklore are always generic (to be sure, this circumstance, obvious to modern folklorists, might be easily misconstrued by the neighbors, for “common people’s” views on art are usually naive). In a different context, DuBois states that traditional singers were expected to stay out of discussion about the formal study of folk music: “A singer’s aura of authenticity could easily be damaged by a display of cognizance” regarding such things (p. 170). The same attitude should probably prevail in all dealings with informants; in this case the difference between content and form is immaterial. It is well-known how uneasy story tellers are when pressed about the veracity of fairy tales. In comparing Guðrún’s lament and *Sonatorrek*, DuBois says: “Although both saga and lament claim to derive from the actual life experiences of a ninth-century Icelandic chieftain, either or both are just as likely the products of the imagination of a thirteenth-century compiler” (p. 46). Isn’t Egill more “real” than Guðrún? Two pages later we read: “Although the text could easily refer to any number of mourning fathers, its accompanying narrative consistently ties it to Egill” (p. 48). DuBois may not have realized that reference to “any number of mourning fathers” is of paramount importance for understanding the nature of introspection in literature and of lyric poetry as a relatively late genre. On p. 159, the German word *Einfühlung* ‘empathy’ is explained, as though *ein-* in it means ‘one,’ but this is perhaps the result of unfortunate wording. The book is almost free from misprints. The only conspicuous one, in the material over which I have sufficient control, is *Guðrúnarqviða* consistently spelled without the second *r* (the same in the index).

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INVENTING ENGLISH: A PORTABLE HISTORY OF ENGLISH. By Seth Lerer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 305; 18 illustrations. \$24.95.

Seth Lerer’s *Inventing English* is a highly personal book. He describes it as “less a history of English in the traditional sense than . . . an episodic epic: a portable assembly of encounters with the language” (p. 2). Seeing language itself as a highly personal matter, whether for himself or his readers, he describes the book as tracing a “course between the individual experience and literary culture, between the details of the past and the drama of the present, between the story of my life I tell here and the stories you may make out of your own” (p. 3). In this vein, Lerer returns frequently to the details of how his own youth and education affected his conceptions of English and helped to define his interest in it. And the casual, witty, and sometimes provocative style in which the book is written provides a very apt vehicle for this very personal account.

By his own admission, Lerer’s interest is in “literary culture.” Accordingly, he only touches on issues like grammatical gender and historical adjectival inflections, variable phonological and morphological rules (including geographically-conditioned variants in the Great Vowel Shift), and diachronic changes in English structures, such as the late Anglo-Saxon leveling of declensions and conjugations or the range of expansions to the English verb phrase in the early modern period. His focus is instead on how the English language of any one period could serve as an appropriate, even transcendent, vehicle for literary expression, particularly through its lexis. To this end the book is structured by a series of chronologically arranged chapters devoted to the accomplishments of a sequence of great men: Cædmon, the *Beowulf* poet, Chaucer, Caxton, John Hart, John Milton, Dr. Johnson,