The Oral Poetics of Professional Wrestling, or Laying the Smackdown on Homer

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Since its development in the first half of the twentieth century, Milman Parry and Albert Lord's theory of "composition in performance" has been central to the study of oral poetry (J. M. Foley 1998:ix-x). This theory and others based on it have been used in the analysis of poetic traditions like those of the West African *griots*, the Viking *skalds*, and, most famously, the ancient Greek epics.[1] However, scholars have rarely applied Parry-Lord theory to material other than oral poetry, with the notable exceptions of musical forms like jazz, African drumming, and freestyle rap.[2] Parry and Lord themselves, on the other hand, referred to the works they catalogued as *performances*, making it possible to use their ideas beyond poetry and music. The usefulness of Parry-Lord theory in studies of different poetic traditions tempted me to view other genres of performance from this perspective. In this paper I offer up one such genre for analysis —professional wrestling—and show that interpreting the tropes of wrestling through the lens of composition in performance provides information that, in return, can help with analysis of materials more commonly addressed by this theory.

Before beginning this effort, it will be useful to identify the qualities that a work must possess to be considered a "composition in performance," in order to see if professional wrestling qualifies. The first, and probably most important and straightforward, criterion is that, as Lord (1960:13) says, "the moment of composition is the performance." This disqualifies art forms like theater and ballet, works typically planned in advance and containing words and/or actions that must be performed at precise times and following a precise order. Second, while works composed in composition are created and performed at the same time, they are not invented extemporaneously. The subject and structure of works composed in performance are

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[1] I will be using the Ancient Greek epics as the primary point of comparison to other genres in this essay.

[2] For discussions of the links between Parry-Lord theory and jazz, see Foster 2004, Gillespie 1991, G. Smith 1983, and Potter 1990, among others. See Ong 1977 for an analysis of African drum traditions. Erik Pihel (1996) has also argued that freestyle rap is, in fact, a form of oral poetry, and that the application of Parry-Lord theory to the genre is not actually an exception to usual practice. Usher (2009) recently and successfully utilized the theory of composition in performance in his analysis of Cynic verbal performance, but like Pihel he largely does so to draw the Cynics into the realm of poetic performance, not to identify them as a separate art form following the same structure.

known in advance, unlike in pure improvisation, and certain key elements are fixed;[3] for example, no version of Hector's battle with Achilles can end with Hector as the victor. This distinguishes works composed in performance from purely improvised pieces.[4] Third, works composed in performance utilize an identifiable series of traditional techniques and stock elements to enable them to construct successfully their performance, most famously the formulae of oral poetry.[5] Parry-Lord theory is only applicable to genres which have all these qualities.

Now that we have the general qualities a work must have to be considered "composed in performance," we can turn to professional wrestling to see if it qualifies. However, for the sake of the (presumably many) scholars unfamiliar with professional wrestling, it may be helpful to provide a brief overview of the genre and its history.[6] The entertainment medium we now call professional wrestling or pro wrestling started out in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century as an honest-to-goodness athletic competition, or at least as honest as athletic competitions were when coming from the world of carnivals and traveling shows.[7] While outcomes were sometimes fixed (as was and sadly is also the case in boxing and other "legitimate" sports), the combatants were trained athletes, participating in a sport that combined elements of a wide variety of grappling forms from across Europe and North America.[8] That said, in both the true competitions

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[3] Lord (1960:26-28), provides a detailed account of the aspects of works composed in performance that are fixed. He also notes that the *guslari* he interviewed often believed that the entireties of their works were fixed, with any discrepancies being chalked up to errors on their part.

[4] Much interesting work on the distinction between improvisation and composition has been done in regard to music, including works like Foss (1962) that define the distinction, and those like Larson (2005) that problematize it. Notably, Larson does not connect jazz to composition in performance, although his analysis points out several qualities in the works he discusses that are closely connected to the kinds of works resulting from composition in performance; this is true even in his discussion (2005:255) of Gregory Smith. For a discussion of improvisation in a context involving words, see Salinsky and Frances-White 2008.

[5] J. M. Foley (1998:11-15) provides a somewhat more generalized description of this process that was particularly useful to this study.

[6] There are many books, both scholarly and mass-market, that discuss the history of professional wrestling. While there are obviously some variations from text to text, and (as we will see later) accounts of the wrestling industry almost always have an at-best shaky relationship with the truth, the general development of the genre depicted in this paper is generally agreed upon. This paper draws primarily on Shoemaker (2013), Morton and O'Brien (1985), and Beekman (2006), who have written arguably the most comprehensive and well-analyzed accounts of pro wrestling in America. Levi (2008) provides an invaluable source for scholars interested in Mexico's famed "Lucha Libre" style of wrestling, but the genre's storied history in other nations (most notably Japan) is still severely understudied.

[7] To this day, much, although certainly not all, of the "insider language" used by those participating in or in some other way wise to the machinations of professional wrestling is drawn directly from the language spoken by carnival workers in this period. See Kerrick (1980) for more on this topic.

[8] See Shoemaker 2013:9-11. Morton and O'Brien (1985:3-5) note that a form of grappling competition, real or fake, has existed since prehistoric times, making it arguably the oldest sport in human history, and it is unusual in existing in some form or another with virtually every culture in history. Ironically, the medium that currently competes most directly with professional wrestling is Mixed Martial Arts, whose blending of international fighting styles comes close to the approach taken in early wrestling matches, and even dealt with many of the same problems in becoming palatable to audiences, namely the length and lack of excitement generated in such a bout without restrictions placed on it (Downey 2007:223, n.10).

of early twentieth-century arenas and the carnival attractions offering locals the chance to win cash prizes by defeating these combatants, spectacle was central to professional wrestling's economic success.[9] At carnivals a planted grappler, dressed as a regular attendee, would often defeat or hold his own against the showcased wrestler in order to convince young men that they could do the same.[10] In true contests boasts about a given grappler's talents and accolades, and the nefarious or unworthy nature of his opponent, would inevitably be published before major bouts, whether or not such boasts were actually made.[11] Unfortunately, these efforts to excite audiences about wrestling spectacles were often undone by the fact that the sport itself was simply not exciting, with matches often going on for interminable hours. Wrestlers and promoters responded by increasingly fixing matches to help build to more profitable and exciting bouts, and transitioning from the use of effective but visually unstimulating techniques to more exciting moves that were by necessity artificial and choreographed. In remarkably little time professional wrestling transformed itself from a boring sport to an exciting performance. However, wrestling, at least publicly, continued to assert some connection to legitimacy.

Despite no longer being a sport in the typical sense of the word, professional wrestlers and promoters in the "fake" era of wrestling publicly treated their performance as a legitimate athletic endeavor for decades. This intentional obfuscation of the true nature of their endeavor to "outsiders" was referred to among wrestlers and in-the-know fans by the term "kayfabe," a term drawn, like many others connected to wrestling, from carnival slang.[12] While professional wrestling is certainly not the only art form to engage in this subterfuge,[13] it took this practice further than virtually any other modern form. Professional wrestling "faces" (heroes) and "heels" (villains) were prohibited from traveling together, and all wrestlers were expected to "protect the business" by fighting people who claimed that they were not truly as tough as their in-ring performances suggested or arguing with (and sometimes attacking) people who

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[9] Shoemaker (2013:12-14) describes this phenomenon, and notes that even two of the most famous "legitimate" wrestlers of the pre-World War I era, Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt, worked in entertainment; Gotch was an actor, Hackenschmidt a carnival strongman.

[10] See Beekman 2006:40. The carnival wrestlers also used similar tactics to ensure that they were rarely if ever legitimately defeated by one of these "marks," to use the carnival term.

[11] Shoemaker (2013:10-14) describes these activities in detail, particularly in regard to Hackenschmidt. It is also worth noting that other sporting events, contemporaneous with "real" wrestling and otherwise, employ similar tactics. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are particularly notable for attempting to use boxers as representative of whole populations, particularly racial populations (Rodriguez 2002:210-12). Morton and O'Brien (1985:5-7) note that grappling has had a connection to issues of masculinity, warfare, and cultural identity since prehistory, and that these were only magnified when wrestling transitioned from sport to art form.

[12] Virtually every scholar to discuss professional wrestling mentions kayfabe, with McQuarrie (2006:227) providing a particularly clear definition of the term. The concept of kayfabe is typically used to refer to a wrestler or promoter's behavior outside of the confines of the ring, but it has been used to describe their in-ring performance (R. Smith 2008:162-64), or, in McQuarrie's case, the entire corporate history of World Wrestling Entertainment.

[13] Magicians come immediately to mind.

questioned wrestling's authenticity.[14] Professional wrestling even allowed itself to be regulated by state athletic commissions (despite the costs and occasional creative problems this caused) until 1989, nearly fifty years after ceasing to be a sport.[15] This was not an attempt to fool fans into believing that the sport is "real," but to create the immersive environment in which the fans can *behave as if* they believed. This is markedly similar to the ideal reactions to traditional art forms like Greek theater.[16] This practice created an environment where knowledge of the true nature of wrestling could give fans the feeling of community associated with having "insider" knowledge.

While brief, this overview of wrestling history highlights two essential elements of its nature as an art form: its unusual mix of truth and fiction, particularly in regards to its earlier history, and the refusal of its practitioners to divulge its nature to outsiders. Both of these have strong parallels with oral poetry. The Homeric epics that still stand as the most famous products of a tradition utilizing composition in performance have a complicated relationship with the historical past that fascinates writers, scholars, and the general public from antiquity to the modern day.[17] While the history connected to Homeric epic is obviously deeper and more complicated than that of pro wrestling, the incorporation of the "real" past into fantastic performance, and the blurry boundary point between where reality ends and the imaginary begins, are elements central to the performance and enjoyment of both art forms. The ways that the practitioners of wrestling and oral poetry treat outside questioners are also closely linked. The *guslari* interviewed by Parry and Lord consistently maintained that they were not composing their works in performance, as was clearly the case, but were in fact performing the piece exactly as they had learned it (often after just one hearing), and in the same way, word for word, as they

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[14] This drive led to several of the most infamous moments in wrestling history, including Dave Schultz's assault of journalist John Stossel (Hart 2008:171), Hulk Hogan choking Richard Belzer into unconsciousness (Shoemaker 2014), and Jerry "The King" Lawler severely injuring Andy Kaufman on live television. Lawler has since claimed that the injury to Kaufman was a "work," wrestling parlance for performance, but the event was believed to be legitimate for over twenty years. Wrestlers are today as likely to claim a real event as fake as they are to claim that a false one was real.

[15] As W. O. Johnson notes (1991:50), World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment) owner Vince McMahon made this declaration in order to lower the taxes he had to pay on live events. Still, the fact that this practice changed does not diminish the fact that it continued for a tremendously long time.

[16] The potential for Greek tragedy to make audiences behave as if they were watching actual events play out onstage rather than a performance is famously illustrated by the tale of women having spontaneous miscarriages upon seeing the titular characters of the *Eumenides*. This tale is found in *Vita Aeschyli* 9, a collection of anonymous fragments concerning Aeschylus (cf. Calder 1998).

[17] The literature on the relationship between the Homeric epics and the historical world is truly vast, but the very few examples below may help in providing a basic overview of the topic. Leaf (1915) arguably helped start the twentieth and twenty-first century conversation on the topic. Rauflaab 1998 provides a good introduction to the recent history of this discussion in scholarship and popular thought from the 1930s onwards. Vermeule (1986) provides an invaluable analysis of the relationship between the Homeric epics and our knowledge of Bronze Age Mediterranean history, as well as the implications of this relationship for approaching both topics. Kim (2010) and Higbie (1997) provide vital analyses about how the Homeric epics were associated with the past during the Roman imperial and classical Greek periods.

did previously (Lord 1960:27).[18] Parry and Lord read the statements of the *guslari* as an honest unawareness of the nature of their performance (Lord 1960:28), in contrast to the wrestlers' intentional practice of kayfabe, but the effect is essentially the same—obfuscating the true nature of an art from people who are not involved in its creation.

Now that we have established the history of professional wrestling as a mode of performance and seen how that history may make it analogous to oral poetic traditions, it is possible to investigate whether its storytelling structure can be described as being truly "composed in performance." Testimony from practitioners of the art form, commonly known as wrestlers or "sports entertainers" suggest that this is the case.[19] Our first piece of evidence comes from an interview that Chris Jericho and Triple H, two of the most successful wrestlers in the modern era, gave to Larry King in 2008:

> JERICHO: It's like being a jazz musician or an improv comedian. You have a certain mindset of what you want to do. But you go out there and follow each other, like a good jazz band will do. A good drummer will follow a good bass player. When you have professionals at this level, everybody works together. But we follow each other and listen to what the crowd says and just kind of go with it.
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> TRIPLE H: That's basically it. I'm like the flute guy and Chris is . . .
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> KING: OK, Triple H., tonight it will take about 20 minutes and you will defeat him.
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> TRIPLE H: Yes. And . . .
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> KING: That's all you know?
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> JERICHO: That's usually the way it goes.

Jericho's and Triple H's description of a professional wrestling match corresponds markedly to two of the qualities of works composed in performance. Like the oral poems more typically analyzed through Parry-Lord theory, certain elements of a wrestling match such as length and outcome are established beforehand, but there is no exact script or choreography to

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[18] This practice may not be limited only to wrestling and narrative oral poetry. Usher (2009:209-10) suggests that Diogenes' *chreia,* insults or jokes often built on quoted or altered lines of Homeric poetry, were carefully rehearsed but presented in a manner that was meant to seem spontaneous, much like the moves in a professional wrestling match. If, as Usher persuasively argues, Cynic insults utilized some of the elements of composition in performance, this may imply that obfuscation of the means of production is a central part of composition of performance.

[19] Professional wrestlers are notorious for being unreliable in their discussions of the history and nature of wrestling. They are, however, the people best able to describe their art, and the decline of kayfabe within the industry has limited, although certainly not eliminated, this unreliability. The proliferation of autobiographies, out of character interviews, and other such materials has also made it easier to confirm the claims made by wrestlers. Whenever possible, the quotes from wrestlers used in this essay were verified against other sources, and will largely be treated as being accurate, or at least accurate to the performer's recollection.

follow; instead, the wrestlers create their story while they perform it.[20] Jericho's comparison of professional wrestlers to jazz musicians is also instructive for us, as jazz is one of few genres outside of oral literature regularly analyzed with composition in performance in mind. Similar descriptions of the "composition" of wrestling matches by their performers can be found in the autobiographies of many wrestlers, including Mick Foley (1999), Bret Hart (2008), and Shawn Michaels (2005). The wrestlers who describe the process of creating a wrestling narrative most clearly are often those who are considered the best at "telling a story" in the ring.

In addition, just as oral poets use traditional formulae to help them compose their poems, wrestlers employ their own set of techniques and stock story elements to compose their piece—the wrestling match—while they perform it: their "move set" which is the distinctive and limited set of strikes, slams, and submissions a given wrestler uses over the course of a simulated battle. These maneuvers are obviously not the metrically and thematically restricted poetic phrases familiar to oral poetry, but the mentioned application of composition in performance to a form music makes clear that a formula need not be verbal to be a formula.[21] As Bauman (1986:3) notes, the performance of oral poetry, with all its inherent formulae, is part of a larger group of communicative performances, an umbrella description that would certainly include professional wrestling. Though the exact number of these moves can vary according to wrestler and promotion,[22] they virtually always contain a key element familiar to scholars of oral traditions: they must be repeatable in many different matches (Horuichi 2012:64-65). Indeed, professional wrestlers often showcase an understanding of the development of move sets as repeatable elements of performance (Hart 2008:53). Oral poets, on the other hand, typically claim complete stories from perfect memory, denying the central role formulae play in their work (Lord 1960:27).

Professional wrestlers' method of storytelling, formulaic move sets, and descriptions of their working process indicate that professional wrestling is indeed "composed in performance," making Parry-Lord theory potentially applicable to it. The next step is to discern whether or not applying the theory to wrestling improves our understanding of the performance type. Due to the current state of wrestling scholarship, this is a relatively easy bar to clear. While there have been some excellent individual studies on the subject, most famously by Barthes (1972), the genre as a whole remains woefully understudied, particularly given its continued international popularity.[23]

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[20] There is some amount of variability in the number of specific moments, or "spots," that are planned out in advance for a given match. Some wrestlers prefer to map about as much of their match as they can, while others prefer a more freewheeling approach. A good example of this interplay can be seen in Mick Foley's account of his famed "Hell in a Cell" match with Mark Calaway, otherwise known as the Undertaker (1999:651-55). While Foley had taken several weeks to convince the Undertaker to start the match on the top of the massive cage, virtually all of the action that took place after his unplanned fall through the cage was created as the match progressed, leading to what many consider one of the greatest matches in wrestling history.

[21] Ong (1977), for instance, uses the term "formula" or "formulaic" 37 times in his work on African drums.

[22] The word "promotion" here refers to the organizations, big and small, that put on wrestling shows.

[23] While one might suggest that wrestling is neglected in scholarship because it is not high culture, other media at a similar level are given considerably more attention. To cite a few examples, "gangsta" rap (430), television cartoons (3,385), and pornography (over 14,000) all pull up considerably more articles on JSTOR (www.jstor.org) than professional wrestling's 251.

Even when scholars do turn their attention to wrestling, their focus is virtually never on narrative structure. Typically, studies of wrestling are either general histories like those of Shoemaker (2013), Beekman (2006), and Morton (1985), meditations on the semiotic or anthropological implications of the form found in Barthes 1972, Mazer 1998, and Ball 1990, or analyses of the wrestling audience like that of Toepher (2011). Independent of the dearth of studies of wrestling narrative, Parry-Lord theory has a unique ability to explain some otherwise perplexing elements of the genre.

The first issue that oral poetic theory may help to explain is professional wrestling's surprisingly complicated narrative structure. The performance pieces (wrestling matches) are themselves discrete narratives with clearly defined beginning, middle, and end.[24] However, these matches are embedded in, and gain their meaning from, an overarching and often contradictory tradition of stories that spans decades and continents. These two aspects of the professional wrestling narrative, though fundamentally different structurally, are mutually dependent. Wrestling's overarching storyline is aimless and uninteresting without considering its relationship to prior and future matches, and audiences without knowledge of the match's backstory will not know how to react to events in the match or may not even be able to identify that there is something to react to at all.[25]

It is difficult to describe the relationship between a wrestling match and the long-form stories connected to wrestlers and wrestling promotions. Most scholarly approaches to narrative apply to either discrete or serial narratives, not a mixed narrative structure like pro wrestling. Traditional narrative theory, as defined by authors like Bal (1997), Gennette (1980), and Schmid (2010), focuses primarily on discrete narratives. Indeed, these scholars tend not to consider the kinds of serial narrative structure that create continuing storylines as we find in professional wrestling; relatively few scholars attempt to apply traditional narratology to serial works.[26] The interpretive models for analyzing serial narrative structure developed by scholars like Mittell (2007) and Hayward (1997) have not yet proven helpful in the analysis of discrete narratives,

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[24] The beginning and end of wrestling matches are even signposted by theme music, much like television shows and movies.

[25] The wrestling columnist David Shoemaker, otherwise known as the (perpetually unmasked) "masked man," recently illustrated this point by providing a verbatim account of the announcers' call of the famed 1984 wrestling match between Hulk Hogan and the Iron Sheik, except reversing the names of the combatants (2012). Much of the "good guy" Hulk Hogan's behavior during the bout was essentially identical to what a dastardly heel typically does. The audience's acceptance and approval of his behavior was therefore predicated not on his actions, but on their prior knowledge of his and the Sheik's characters based on the overarching World Wrestling Federation narrative.

[26] Traditional narratology's difficulties in dealing with serial structures are most obvious in the rare efforts to apply it to serial or once serial fiction, such as Stewart's (2008) attempt to apply it to Charles Dickens. While Stewart notes that Dickens' works were originally serialized, his attempts to apply narratology force him to treat them like traditional novels. Discussion of Victorian serials like that of Leighton and Surridge (2008) and Keymer (2000) come closer to success in this regard, but maintain their focus on discrete works more than open ended ones. Narratology has been successfully utilized on the Homeric epics by several noted scholars, including De Jong (2001 and elsewhere) and the authors in Greithlein's and Rengakos' edited volume on the topic (2009). However, much of this success has come from treating the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as texts, with the exception of Bakker (2009) in the aforementioned volume. A wrestling match, in contrast, like an actual oral poetic performance, cannot be treated this way.

although that may change as study develops. Professional wrestling, being neither wholly discrete nor wholly serialized, is therefore difficult to analyze using either mode of interpretation. The theory of composition in performance, on the other hand, is not only capable of analyzing performances using this sort of mixed narrative structure, but indeed specializes in doing so.

Oral traditions regularly exhibit the same interplay between discrete tale and overarching storyline that we see in professional wrestling. When describing oral poetry, Lord notes that "in a very real sense, every performance is an original song; for every performance is unique . . ." (1960:4). This description of a single oral poem as a discrete, distinctive work also applies to individual wrestling matches, particularly since wrestlers often face each other multiple times over the course of their careers, just as an oral poet will perform the same poem multiple times. In both cases, while the structure and outcome of the performances are often the same, each individual performance is a unique event.[27] At the same time, the Serbian poems analyzed by Parry and Lord, and most of the oral poetic traditions that have been analyzed using their methodology, are couched in larger mythical traditions that, as it were, exert control over these works while providing them with invaluable context and meaning. Moreover, as Burgess (2003:4) notes in his discussion of the Trojan War saga, the mythic tradition associated with poems composed in performance does not develop solely out of the poems themselves, but from a wide variety of sources. This is also true in professional wrestling narratives, which are driven by interviews, video montages, and backstage encounters just as much as in-ring action. A look at just two of many professional wrestling analogs for this phenomenon reveals that the theory of composition in performance, unlike the more delineated structural models of narrative, is also effective for defining this genre.

When Shawn Michaels (né Michael Shawn Hickenbottom) "turned heel," moving from hero to villain, his method was predicated on the mixed narrative model wrestling shares with oral poetry and other genres of narrative composed in performance. During a series of matches Michaels and his tag team partner Marty Jannetty had miscommunications, sometimes leading to losses. None of the narratives in the individual matches were strong enough to actually force Michaels' character to change in that instant, but, when "read" within the WWF's overarching narrative, those matches set the stage for Michaels' move to the dark side, while still retaining the element of surprise for when the turn actually occurred. Notably, Michaels' actual "heel turn" (change from good guy to bad guy) took place not during a wrestling match but during an interview segment meant to advance the general narrative, as did the introduction of a supporting character, the manager Sensational Sherri, to solidify his new identity.[28] The decision to develop Michaels' character from sources outside of wrestling matches ultimately became vital to its success; Jannetty's personal problems prevented a climactic battle between the two from coming to fruition, but Michaels' in-ring character evolved to match the persona he developed in his

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[27] Bret Hart's 2009 memoir *Hitman* provides multiple accounts of series of matches with the same opponent that recall Lord's accounts of the Serbian *guslari* performing the ostensibly same poem over and over, as do several other wrestler autobiographies.

[28] A general account of Michaels' heel turn can be found in his autobiography (2005:157-67). Notably, Michaels claims that he was on another continent when Sherri conducted her interview and was unaware of it until after the fact.

interviews and wardrobe choices. Indeed, his new "Heartbreak Kid" persona became so iconic and popular that audience reactions eventually drove him to become a "face" (good guy) again, and he ultimately became one of the most popular and successful characters in wrestling history.[29] The way a wrestler's character evolves is fundamentally different from the means of changing characters in serial or contained narratives, but is markedly similar to how Burgess (2003) describes the evolution of the Trojan War myth.

Video 1: Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty, wrestling together as The Rockers. Note the identical outfits and move lists, which formulaically links them together as a unit. Video from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls0gp9f4Jdg
eCompanion: http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/duffy#myGallery-picture(1)

Video 2: Shawn Michaels' "Heel turn" on Marty Jannetty. Note the repeated references to past events, and to the dramatic change in Michaels' clothing, showing the break with the previous character and its formulae. Video from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsvUNQyWFhw
eCompanion: http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/duffy#myGallery-picture(2)

As Burgess notes, the development of the Trojan War myth was not the result of a single performance, or even single mode of performance, but of the intermingling of multiple traditions: epic poetry, non-epic verses, prose folktales, and even artwork could and did influence the motifs and storylines that ultimately made up the Trojan War tradition (2003:4). Similarly, Shawn Michaels' persona was created through a mix of his behavior during professional wrestling matches, syndicated interviews, and a change in attire utilized in staged "real life" moments, entering and leaving wrestling arenas. Notably, in both Michaels' heel turn and Burgess' model of the Trojan War myth (2003:5-6), the most famous elements of the wider narrative did not have a larger impact on the evolution of the story than the less famous ones did. Just as minor poems and artistic conventions transformed the Trojan War tradition as much as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Shawn Michaels' behavior in staged "backstage" vignettes and magazine interviews ultimately did more to push his storyline forward than anything that happened during

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[29] The changed role of a character and performer in the wrestling storyline in response to audience reaction is a key component in keeping often decades-long narratives compelling; it shares this trait with oral poetry. As Ong (2012:158) notes, a performer can change a poem's length, style, and characterization of key figures in midstream to match the desires of its audience. In that regard, it may be worth noting that Shawn Michaels was arguably most beloved after his last WWE Heavyweight Championship reign ended and least appreciated when he actually held the title; reactions to him were and are seemingly predicated not on his place in the wrestling narrative, but the regard in which he is held as a performer and person.

the then WWF's flagship *WrestleMania* and *Royal Rumble* Pay-Per-Views.[30]   Indeed, the wardrobe changes that were key to heralding Shawn Michaels' heel turn were largely absent from his matches. Both processes are fundamentally different from the way that narratives are altered in purely serial or discrete narratives, in which changes to a character or world happen exclusively within the story itself. It is also worth noting that many of Shawn Michaels' matches and interviews during his turn occurred during untelevised "house shows." In these shows Michaels would wrestle the same opponent and give interviews on the same topic over and over again, but each audience would see a unique performance that would further its understanding of the professional wrestling narrative. This activity is markedly similar to Nagy's description of oral poetic performance (1996:7-38).

Shawn Michaels' (probably) unwitting use of an approach to narrative development parallel with one found in oral traditions, along with his innate talent and charisma, resulted in the creation of one of the most successful characters in wrestling history. This example shows that professional wrestling is most successful when it follows the structure of oral epic and other works composed in performance: creating a symbiotic link between an individual work composed in performance and a larger narrative tradition. Every Shawn Michaels' performance, even local shows viewed by only the crowds present that day, was enhanced because knowledge of the overarching storyline affected both his performance and his audience's reaction to it: the long-term storyline was enhanced and stabilized by specific individual performances, including, but not limited to, wrestling matches.[31] Participants in the wrestling narrative who focus on one part of it to the detriment of others risk damaging both their performance and weakening the tradition. Mick Foley describes one example of this in his autobiography *Have a Nice Day* (1999:268-69):

> The next morning, we woke up and fumbled through the television stations on the remote control. "Let's keep it there," I requested when the sterile ambiance of WCW Worldwide flickered onto the screen. My match with Vader was on. Boom, boom, boom—I was really nailing big Leon. I was nervous with anticipation as Vader threw back the mat. They hadn't made reference to the injury [that Foley had suffered at Vader's hands under identical circumstances] of exactly one year ago yet, but now the story would surely unfold. Vader picked me up for the powerbomb and sent me crashing down to the concrete. Splat. To tell you the truth, this one actually looked more devastating than the one in '93. I listened for the brilliant call—sometimes the right words can really cement an image in the fans' minds. Here it comes. Bobby Heenan was the first to comment on this historic, career-turning moment. "That'll give you Excedrin headache number nine," said the braid, with about as much raw, naked emotion as Al Gore on sedatives. "Indeed it will," added Schiovanne. Then—nothing . . . That was the final nail. I thought about it for two days, and made my decision to quit World Championship Wrestling.

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[30] The World Wrestling Federation eventually changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), after it was sued by the World Wildlife Fund over the WWF abbreviation.

[31] Notably, much of the enhancement and stabilization discussed here comes from the behavior of the audience, not just the performer. See Toepfer 2011 for a discussion of the importance of the wrestling audience on genre generally.

From the perspective of composition in performance, the failure described by Mick Foley stemmed not from the tale told in his in-ring performance with Vader, but in the failure of the announcers to connect the performance with the larger wrestling tradition. Foley included elements in his match meant to allude to his history with Vader, but Bobby Heenan's description stripped it of all significance. This phenomenon links to the observation of John Miles Foley (1995:28) that the power of a work composed in performance comes from the interrelatedness of the performance and overarching tradition. Any work composed in performance that fails to link these two components, be it an epic poem or a steel cage match, is destined to fail—in the sense that it will be less meaningful or meaningless. Mick Foley's impassioned description of how his performance was treated draws the implications of this kind of failure in performance to the foreground. Perhaps Bobby Heenan would not have been so careless if he had spent some time with the *guslari*.

The concept of "thrift" in composition in performance can also be valuable to the study of wrestling's narrative structure.[32] Thrift refers to a phenomenon that provides one, and ideally only one, way of describing individual characters, concepts, and actions per compositional space.[33] This distinguishes such works from those created primarily through writing, even if they are of the same genre; epic poetry provides a particularly well known example (Parry 1987:xxvii). Thriftiness is why Diomedes can never be described as "swift footed" in Homeric poetry, nor Achilles as "good at the war cry," even though both are fast and good yellers. Scholars typically use the concepts of formula and utility in discussing poetry and metrics, but the concept need not be limited to them. Professional wrestling is obviously not "metrical" in the sense that a poem is, but each wrestler *does* have signature moves that are keyed to specific matches or parts of a match, just as poetic phrases in oral poetry are restricted to certain characters, scenes, and locations in a verse. Thinking of a wrestler's move set as a collection of formulae proves helpful for interpreting a problematic aspect of the professional wrestling match: the finishing move, each wrestler's signature technique for securing victory.

Considered from standard perspectives of storytelling, professional wrestling finishers are problematic at best and nonsensical at worst. When a wrestler ends nearly all of his fights in the same manner, it makes them considerably less realistic. In combat sports, virtually no fighter has only one means of achieving victory. To cite two examples, mixed martial artist Mirko "Cro Cop" Filipovic, famed for his left high kick, "finishes" less than a third of his matches with that maneuver, and Muhammad Ali knocked out opponents with at least four different types of

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[32] As Adam Parry notes (1987:xxvii, n.2), Milman Parry used the terms "economy" and "thrift" interchangeably to describe this phenomenon.

[33] J. M. Foley (1988:23-28) provides a valuable explanation of Milman Parry's original 1928 theory, using some of Parry's examples.

punches.[34] If the goal of professional wrestling matches is to simulate a real fight as convincingly as possible, the finishing move would be counterproductive. However, if we look at wrestling as composition in performance, the "finishing move" becomes not only acceptable but vital.

If a wrestling match is understood as composition in performance, its "formulae" (wrestling moves) should be subject to the same rules of thrift as formulae in oral poetry. Just as a *guslar* selects his specific epithets, stock scenes, and extended metaphors to match the needs of specific points in his poem, a wrestler chooses moves from his repertoire to correspond with where he is in the narrative of any given match, not according to any consideration of what would be the tactically best choice. In the instance of the "finishing move," wrestlers sacrifice the verisimilitude of ending their fights in a variety of ways for the ability to send a clear signal to the audience that the climax of the narrative is at hand.[35] The ability to use one, and only one, maneuver at the end of a match is therefore as valuable to the professional wrestler as the oral poet's ability to refer to Athena as "gray eyed."

Indeed, rather than detracting from the experience, as it might if the simulated battle were seeking verisimilitude, wrestling's finishing moves help fans understand and immerse themselves in the story of the match, just like any good narrative device, or any good formula.[36] A good example of this is Hulk Hogan's famed leg drop. The technique is actually a common one, used by other performers at various points throughout a match, but because Hogan uses it exclusively at the end of his matches, it has become arguably the most famous move in wrestling history. This is not due to its technical brilliance, or its ability to imitate something that would actually be done in real-life hand to hand combat. Instead, Hogan's Leg Drop succeeds, to borrow Bauman's terms (1986:3-4), as a communicative act: the audience can immediately

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[34] Information about the means of victory for these fights comes from their publicly available professional combat record. Mirko Filipovic's record can be found, among many other places, at mixed martial arts website sherdog.com (http://www.sherdog.com/fighter/Mirko-Filipovic-2326). There is no single location that identifies every punch used by Muhammad Ali to win a fight, but a cursory look at his most famous bouts includes knockouts via left hook (The "Rumble in the Jungle" with George Foreman), body blows (victory over Archie Moore), right straights and uppercuts (both numerous), and the famed "anchor punch" that sent Sonny Liston to the mat in their second bout. Recently, female mixed martial artist Ronda Rousey has proven an exception to this rule, winning all of her bouts by first round armbar, a common submission hold based on hyperextending the opponent's elbow joint. However, this seems to be a function of lacking opponents that are legitimate challengers, making her use of a "finishing move" more akin to the narrative tool of professional wrestlers than a necessity in a combat sport. Indeed, as her opponents have improved, her methods of victory have varied somewhat, although she remains undefeated.

[35] Except in the case of false finishes, the resolution of the narrative takes place immediately after the finishing maneuver with the "pin fall," when one wrestler holds the other's shoulders down to the mat for the official count to three.

[36] The first finishing move to gain wide fame, the "Airplane Spin," was visually distinctive but completely impossible to do without the putative opponent's active assistance (Shoemaker 2013:23-24), which supports the argument that the finishing move was more about narrative than reality from the very beginning.

recognize it as symbolizing the end of a match and the victory of a character (usually)[37] identified as their champion, and react accordingly.[38]
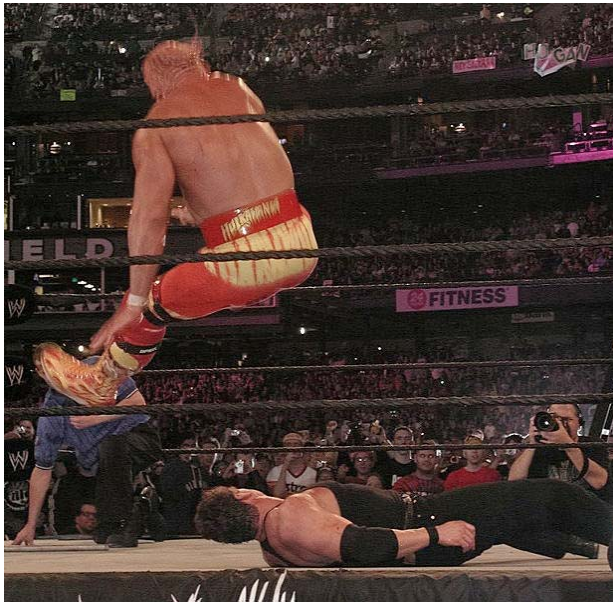
Image 1: The Hulk Hogan Leg Drop, known for the past thirty years as a devastating finisher. Image from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leg_drop#mediaviewer/File:Hoganlegdrop.jpg. eCompanion: http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/duffy#myGallery-picture(3)

Image 2: This maneuver is a transitional move in a match, *not* a finisher. Image from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leg_drop#mediaviewer/File:Chief_Ade_leg_drop.jpg. eCompanion: http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/duffy#myGallery-picture(4)

These examples only scratch the surface of what Parry-Lord theory can offer the study of professional wrestling narratives. The question then becomes whether the reverse is true: can studying professional wrestling further our understanding of oral poetry? A close look at professional wrestling reveals that it can.

First and foremost, scholars researching professional wrestling have access to one of the largest preserved data sets for any art form. The World Wrestling Entertainment Vault alone had 130,000 hours of material as of 2013 (http://www.wwe.com/classics/inside-video-vault-26125073/page-4), and has added thousands of hours since. Even this collection is but a fraction of recorded wrestling matches, and does not include the thousands of live wrestling

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[37] Hulk Hogan has spent most of his career as a fan favorite, although his "heel turn" and subsequent time as the villainous leader of World Championship Wrestling's "New World Order" is the single most successful storyline in professional wrestling history.

[38] The ability of wrestling fans to recognize that a Hulk Hogan Leg Drop is somehow fundamentally different from that of another 6'6", 300 pound man and react accordingly suggests that they have a contextual knowledge of certain wrestling *formulae*. This naturally leads one to wonder if audiences of oral poetry would possess the same knowledge, and what the implications of that would be.

events that occur in the (at least) 170 nations that showcase the performance form.[39] The sum total of this material is very likely more than all of our other collections of narrative art composed in performance combined.[40] Professional wrestling has been a major part of television programming since the invention of the medium (Beekman 2006:73-94), and the top three weekly scripted series in terms of number of episodes are wrestling programs.[41] Also, on any given weekend, dozens of non-televised wrestling events are put on in the United States, and hundreds worldwide. By comparison, the number of performances of extant oral poetic traditions has significantly dwindled, particularly those that engage in long-term narrative construction as oral epic did and professional wrestling does.[42] Even extant narrative oral traditions have limitations regarding both their current state and our access to them, which may make comparative analysis with more robust performance traditions useful.

The first potential problem with extant oral narratives is that our methods of preserving them can affect their form. In Lord's and Parry's fieldwork dictated versions of oral poems were considerably more normalized than audio recordings of the same poem, as well as considerably longer than sung texts that Lord transcribed (1953:126-27). Lord noticed that both the poet and the stenographer edited the dictated texts after they were written. Such editorial interventions add a layer of artificiality, though they do not diminish the value of the work. This also gives us some pause regarding recorded texts, since poets who changed their work in response to written recording could also be expected to do so in response to other forms of recording. The second

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[39] The WWE Vault contains materials from a half dozen to a dozen major wrestling organizations, all based in the United States or Canada. However, it does not include the dozens of unfilmed "house shows" the WWE puts on every year, which are sometimes recorded by other parties. It also does not contain materials from the competing Total Nonstop Action (TNA) promotion, which has produced 12 years of televised and non-televised material, the hundreds of lower tier "independent" promotions that exist or have existed over the course of the medium's existence, or the large and small organizations that put on events in other nations. WWE broadcasts reach markets in 170 nations according to their company overview (http://corporate.wwe.com/company/overview), and it is likely that at least that many countries house at least one wrestling promotion. Several of these countries, notably Mexico, Japan, and Germany, have professional wrestling traditions and promotions that go back almost to the beginnings of the art, with large portions of it recorded on videotape. The WWE Vault is however unique in being available to any individual who pays the $9.99 fee for the WWE network, making it not only larger but easier to access than the vast majority of oral literature databases.

[40] "Narrative art composed in performance" refers to oral poetry, other forms of oral literature, and theatrical and film performances of this type. However, it leaves out musical forms like jazz and rap, which probably have more total hours of material than wrestling does.

[41] This is a limited definition, not counting news, talk shows, or daily serial formats. It should also be noted that the number of episodes of the longest weekly scripted shows combined does not equal that of the long lasting daily soap operas, the most fully serialized art form on film *Monday Night Raw* has put on over 1,100 episodes (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WWE_Raw), *WWE Superstars* over 925 (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0261495/), and *WWE Smackdown* will soon pass episode 800 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WWE_SmackDown). *Gunsmoke*'s 635 episodes is the record for a non-wrestling scripted series (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunsmoke). While the numbers listed above are mostly drawn from Wikipedia and IMDb, they can all be confirmed through a number of other websites.

[42] The most robust extant oral tradition, judged by both the popularity of its performances and the increasing number and skill of its performers, is probably the Basque *bertsolaritza*, the subject of 2007 *Oral Tradition* special volume, with the contributions of J. M. Foley (2007) and Garzia (2007) being particularly useful for those unfamiliar with the tradition. However, this tradition, focused on short performances on generic topics, does not participate in the sort of large scale mythmaking associated with older oral epic traditions.

issue is that, with the possible exception of the Basque *bertsolaritza* (which is not primarily engaged in extended mythic narratives), almost all extant oral traditions are many generations old, which creates some limitations for study. Albert Lord (1960:129-31) famously stated that the *guslar* tradition central to his and Parry's study of composition in performance was in essentially its last generation when he and Parry studied it;[43] while similar traditions may have outlasted the Serbo-Croatian poets, virtually all are at or near their nadir in terms of the number and quality of practitioners. This limits our ability to draw conclusions about their composition in performance generally. While professional wrestling is not oral poetry, it may be able to address a couple of these issues.

Professional wrestling immensely popular;[44] millions of the people in the United States alone watch professional wrestling in person or on television, and over 100 countries put on wrestling events. Many of the best performers in the genre's history are still practicing or recently retired, and virtually all of their matches can be studied through existing recordings. It may therefore be possible to observe in professional wrestling elements of composition in performance that exist only in traditions that are at their height, and cannot be seen in most currently extant oral traditions. Given the ubiquity of wrestling performances, both new and archived, it is possible to study them without worrying about any of the complications Lord and others have found when they personally recorded their materials. These qualities may allow the comparanda of wrestling to supplement research into oral poetry on certain important topics connected to composition in performance. One such topic, although not by any means the only one, is the creation of formulae.

As professional wrestlers develop their move sets, certain maneuvers enter and leave their repertoire, while others remain for decades. This process is similar to the presumed process of the accrual of an oral poet's formulae (Jahandarie 1999:7-8). Based on traditions that are either very old or no longer extant, studies of oral poetry to date have not been able to explain *why* one specific formula emerges and endures while another disappears.[45] Professional wrestling, on the other hand, provides some footing to tackle this issue directly.

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[43] Edwards and Sienkewicz (1991:7-8) noted that Lord's claim was slightly exaggerated, and that some *guslari* did perform in a largely literate Yugoslavia. Still, the lack of dynamism that Lord describes is entirely accurate and consistent with other oral traditions.

[44] It may be notable that wrestling's decline in popularity has coincided both with a decline in the practice of kayfabe and in an increase in the "scripting" of matches, with more specific moments in a contest being planned out beforehand, both indicative that composition in performance is playing a somewhat smaller role in the current product.

[45] Drout (2011) provides an interesting theory about the process by which formulae and multiforms generally increase and decrease in popularity, and his specific comments about *Caedmon's Hymn* (450-56) provide some insight into how this process functions for a given word or phrase. However, since Drout can only observe the results of the evolution he describes in the hymn, and not the process (which finished centuries ago), he cannot say, to use his examples, why the *scop eorðan* pair is the most common version of line five, only that one of the four examples would have to gain prominence over the other three. Professional wrestling, on the other hand, makes it possible to see the phenomena in real time; if Drout's evolutionary model of multiformity is correct, professional wrestling archives will allow us to see the moments of selection. A study of this type has not been done yet, but absolutely has promise.

Looking at the development of professional wrestling move sets, the first thing that becomes clear is that, with notable exceptions, a particular move's entrance into a wrestler's permanent repertoire is based neither on its inherent impressiveness nor the apparent harm it does to opponents, nor even the audience's reaction to the maneuver itself. Instead, whether or not a maneuver becomes entrenched in the wrestling tradition is determined by the *wrestler's* popularity at the time he experiments with it. For instance, wrestler Dwayne Johnson, who originally competed under the moniker "Rocky Maivia," typically ended his victories with a "shoulder breaker," lifting up opponents and driving their shoulder into his knee. However, his "Rocky Maivia" character ultimately failed, and Johnson was later repackaged more successfully as "The Rock."[46] In this guise Johnson utilized a new finishing move, the "Rock Bottom," which involved lifting an opponent and then slamming him onto his back. As Johnson's new character became more popular, the "Rock Bottom" became a staple not only of his matches, but also of the matches of a variety of wrestlers from the local to national level who wished to link their performance(s) to his. The "shoulder breaker," on the other hand, disappeared completely from the Rock's repertoire and is no longer used as a finishing maneuver.[47] This suggests that, independent of the inherent qualities of the techniques themselves, a formulaic move gains widespread acceptance based on how popular the originating wrestler is when he performs the move. It may also be valuable to note that, even though wrestling moves seem to enter into permanent rotation based on factors other than their inherent quality, once entrenched, those moves, like oral poetic formulae, remain a part of a performer's toolset for the entirety of his or her career.

As mentioned earlier, the age of most oral poetic traditions makes it difficult to tell how the formulae and epithets they use came into existence. In Homeric terms it is not clear why Achilles is "swift footed" instead of "good at the war cry." If epics follow the model of composition in performance found in professional wrestling, the development of specific formulae would not be due to anything particularly appropriate or expressive in the words (other than, of course, that they fulfilled the necessary metrical requirements), but due to the popularity of the singers and songs in which the formulae appear. We know from the *guslari* interviewed by Parry and Lord that oral poets regularly borrow narratives from other poets, and that this is a central part of their training (1960:13-29): it stands to reason that they could also appropriate turns of phrase made known by particularly famous colleagues. Just like the "Rock Bottom," the epithets used by the more popular poets would be repeated throughout oral traditions until they became permanent fixtures, not because they were objectively better epithets but because they were once sung by a poet thought to be worth imitating.

In closing, the purpose of this paper—beyond offering a means of understanding an important aspect of professional wrestling—has been to invite further conversation regarding the applicability of Parry-Lord theory to genres outside of oral poetry. The insights about how Parry-

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[46] Johnson, along with his ghost writer Joe Layden, describes the failure and transformation of the Rocky Maivia character at length in his 2000 autobiography (D. Johnson and Layden).

[47] Some wrestlers very occasionally use a "shoulder breaker" during a performance, but even they are largely limited to those like the WWE's Antonio Cesaro who use an intentionally dated move set as part of their gimmick.

Lord theory illuminates the professional wrestling genre and how analysis of wrestling can inform our study of other works composed in performance, could be developed further. Study into how wrestling's audience affects its narrative tradition might prove invaluable to the study of older oral epic traditions, like Greek epic, whose audiences are unreachable. Similarly, further application of Parry-Lord theory to professional wrestling may yield many more insights into the nature and character of this form of performance. The study of oral poetic "type scenes" holds particular promise for the analysis of key types of, and elements in, wrestling matches. At the same time, there are certain distinctions between wrestling and oral poetry that need to be accounted for. In particular, the fact that wrestlers both create and are part of their narratives is non trivial. And it is also true that, just as in the case of Greek epic and other types of works composed in performance, other theoretical approaches can increase our understanding of wrestling as type of performance. In conclusion, connecting professional wrestling to Parry-Lord theory affords clear benefits for understanding wrestling itself and other genres traditionally connected to the theory. If the concept of "composition in performance" can be usefully applied to something so far afield from the typical theorist's interest as professional wrestling, it is very likely that this concept may be profitably applied to a host of other types of performance. After all, a good theory, like a carefully placed steel chair, begs to be used.[48]

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