**'Verbal Dueling'**
Irina A. Dumitrescu (4th Yr Undergrad)
University of Toronto
January, 2003

'Hwæt', that all-purpose starting word of Old English poetry, has endured a number of different translations. I have seen 'Ay', 'Lo', 'Listen', 'So' and 'Now', but I propose a new word: 'Yo'. Both 'hwæt' and 'yo' are used to draw attention to the speaker so as to initiate an oral performance, and translating the first word of *Beowulf* with an interjection evoking modern African American pop culture would put readers in mind to see likenesses between the literatures of these two oral cultures. One generic similarity appears between the medieval Germanic flyting and modern rap music. The flyting is difficult to define and often difficult to identify; but for our purposes, we will consider it as a verbal exchange of boasts, insults, or some combination of both, delivered in a stylized, rhetorical form.

….

The particular flyting I will be using as a point of comparison is the showdown between Beowulf and Unferth upon Beowulf's arrival at Heorot. Unferth accuses Beowulf of having engaged in a foolish swimming contest with his friend Breca, and, what's worse, of having lost. Beowulf retells the story, explaining that he was young when he made the bet, and describing all the sea-monsters he killed while fulfilling it, ending by remarking that Grendel would never have produced such havoc in Heorot if Unferth had been as fierce as his word. Halama argues that flyting in Anglo-Saxon poems as well as in dozens or rap is 'illustrative of man's strategy in positioning himself apart from the Other', proposing that Beowulf situates his Geatish men as superior to other societies, whether Danish or monstrous, and that this action is similar to racism in America, especially as expressed in gangsta rap against white police.

While I believe that the flyting traditions in these two cultures do share many characteristics, and function in similar ways, I do not think the comparison requires us to make tenuous connections between tribal and racial differences, nor to lump the Danes, who, after all, have long-standing and positive diplomatic relations with the Geats, in with the lone-walking monsters who prey on them. The flyting in *Beowulf*, I would argue, is more intra-societal than inter-societal; the outsider here is Grendel, Beowulf and Unferth being men who speak the same language, who subscribe to the same value system, and who, whatever their doubts may be about each other's credibility, share the goal of restoring peace and safety to Heorot. Likewise, a consideration of gangsta rap's audience shows that the boasting and insults cannot be a flyting against white police. First of all, it is not white cops who listen to and buy rap. Raps are usually addressed from one Black man to another member of his community, someone with the same vernacular and background; the police are referred to in the third person, and in this case, are more like Grendel, the outsider, the scourge, with whom no dialogue is possible.

Carol Clover states that 'the single most important attribute ... of flyting contenders is their verbal skill', their ability to use words as weapons, a metaphor which is played out repeatedly in discussions of verbal contests. When a hero such as Beowulf wields the sophisticated rhetorical structure of the flyting, he is representing a warrior ethic that values verbal agility. We see another such value system in rap music, which draws from the African American dozens tradition an appreciation for a quick wit and a sharp tongue. The dozens are a generally playful kind of verbal contest of stylized insults, sometimes rhymed, which do not purport to be true (often consisting of ludicrous propositions about the physical attributes or sexual proclivities of the opponent's 'mama'), but the rapper's boasting and insults take a more serious, and richly self-referential, edge. In Tupac Shakur's '[Never Be Beat](http://www.ohhla.com/anonymous/2_pac/the_lost/never_be.2pc.txt)', Tupac and Ray Tyson use verse wrought with a strong beat, end rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, near-rhyme, simile, assonance and enjambment to establish their supremacy in the battlefield of rap. Tyson rhymes:

You are useless as a toothless piranha
I'm ruthless now I'm gonna
bust it and discuss it make it funky to hear
Paragraph to the people penetratin' your ear

Tyson points out his opponent's inefficacy as a man in a way reminiscent of *Beowulf*, his lines pounding forward in a four-beat, often alliterative line that suggests some of the vigour Anglo-Saxon verse might have had in performance. Tupac, for his part, maintains the 'words as weapons' motif throughout the song, with such phrases as 'My mic's a weapon, I'm steppin' with a capable rhyme' and 'Cause my mouth is like an uzi when it moves so quick/And the lyrics are the bullets that I'm loadin' it with'. The M alliteration around the word 'uzi' reinforces the punning idea that Shakur's music carries the force of an uzi. The power of verbal dexterity is dramatized in the movie [*8 Mile*](http://www.8-mile.com/), in which Eminem's character Jimmy 'Rabbit' Smith fights his way out of a poor, hopeless, and violence-filled life in Detroit by taking part in hip hop battles; in these sessions, each contestant faces off and insults the other with extemporized rhymes that ridicule his opponent's personal weaknesses and life history.