

The Epic

Oral Heroic Narrative— An Epic Task

Imagine that you're performing with an improvisational theater group. First, you are asked to pretend that you're an Automated Teller Machine (ATM) that intentionally tries people's patience. Easy, you think. Next, you must play a butcher who can't stand the sight of meat. No problem. Then a scholarly-looking man asks you to recite a long narrative poem about the heroic struggles of a legendary figure who uses strength, cunning, and help from the gods to survive perilous trials—and you have to use elevated, solemn language throughout. You're speechless, uncomprehending, until it hits you—the man wants an epic.

What Is an Epic?

An **epic** is a long narrative poem that celebrates a hero's deeds. The earliest epic tales survived for centuries as oral traditions before they were finally written down. They came into existence as spoken words and were retold by poet after poet from one generation to the next. Most orally composed epics date back to preliterate periods—before the cultures that produced them had developed written forms of their languages.

Many epics are based in historical fact, so that their public performance by poets (known in different cultures by such names as *scops* or *bards*) provided both entertainment and education for the audience. Oral poets had to be master improvisers, able to compose verse in their heads while simultaneously singing or chanting it. These poets didn't make up their

stories from scratch, however; they drew on existing songs and legends, which they could embellish or combine with original material.

One characteristic feature of oral poetry is the repetition of certain words, phrases, or even lines. Two of the most notable examples of repeated elements are stock epithets and kennings.

Stock epithets are adjectives that point out special traits of particular persons or things. In Homer, stock epithets are often compound adjectives, such as the “swift-footed” used to describe Achilles.

Kennings are poetic synonyms found in Germanic poems, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. Rather than being an adjective, like an epithet, a kenning is a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for a noun. For example, in *Beowulf* “the Almighty's enemy” and “sin-stained demon” are two kennings that are used in place of Grendel's name.

Stock epithets and kennings were building blocks that a poet could recite while turning his attention to the next line or stanza. Epithets had an added advantage—they were designed to fit metrically into specific parts of the lines of verse. In skillful hands, these “formulas” helped to establish tone and reinforce essentials of character and setting.

Characteristics of an Epic

Epics from different languages and time periods do not always have the same characteristics. Kennings, for example, are not found in Homer's epics. However, the following characteristics are shared by most epics, whether they were composed orally or in



writing, in the Middle Ages or last year, in Old English or in Slovak:

- The hero, generally a male, is of noble birth or high position, and often of great historical or legendary importance.
- The hero's character traits reflect important ideals of his society.
- The hero performs courageous—sometimes even superhuman—deeds that reflect the values of the era.
- The actions of the hero often determine the fate of a nation or group of people.
- The setting is vast in scope, often involving more than one nation.
- The poet uses formal diction and a serious tone.
- Major characters often deliver long, formal speeches.
- The plot is complicated by supernatural beings or events and may involve a long and dangerous journey through foreign lands.
- The poem reflects timeless values, such as courage and honor.
- The poem treats universal themes, such as good and evil or life and death.

The Epic Across Cultures

The epic is not a dead form. Although epics were sung by Sumerians as far back as the third millennium B.C., new oral epics continue to be created and recited in places like the Balkans and Southeast Asia. Many poets around the world still write poems in the epic tradition, and the epic spirit animates many prose works, such as J. R. R.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a popular fantasy novel. Many contemporary films are also cast in an epic mold, including such Hollywood hits as the *Star Wars* trilogy, which features an intergalactic struggle between the forces of good and evil.

YOUR TURN What evidence of epic features might you expect to find in the *Star Wars* trilogy?



Strategies for Reading: The Epic

1. Notice which characteristics of epics appear in the poem you are reading.
2. Decide what virtues the hero embodies.
3. Decide if the epic's values are still held today.
4. Determine the hero's role in bringing about any changes in fortune for the characters.
5. Use a list or diagram to keep track of the characters.
6. If a passage confuses you, go back and summarize the main idea of the passage.
7. When reading *Beowulf* (page 32) or the *Iliad* (page 67), use the accompanying Guide for Reading to help you clarify the language and form your own interpretation.
8. **Monitor** your reading strategies and modify them when your understanding breaks down. Remember to use your Strategies for Active Reading: **predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify, and evaluate.**

from Beowulf

Epic Poetry by the BEOWULF POET
Translated by BURTON RAFFEL



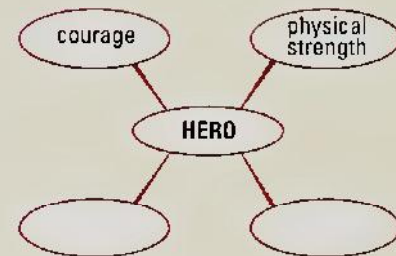
Comparing Literature of the World

Beowulf and the Iliad

This lesson and the one that follows present an opportunity for comparing the epic heroes in *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*. Specific points of comparison in the *Iliad* lesson will help you contrast Beowulf's heroism with that of characters in Homer's epic poem.

Connect to Your Life

Brave Heart According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a traditional hero is someone "endowed with great courage and strength" and "celebrated for his bold exploits." Are courage, strength, and boldness qualities you look for in a modern hero? Would you say that a hero's deeds have to be celebrated, or at least widely known? Think about people in today's world that you consider heroic. Then, in a cluster diagram like the one shown, jot down the qualities that make these people heroes in your eyes. Use your ideas to help you formulate your own definition of *hero*.



WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

affliction
cowering
fetter
gorge
infamous
lament
livid
loathsome
murky
pilgrimage
purge
relish
talon
taut
writhing

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS ALLITERATION

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words. Poets frequently use alliteration to emphasize particular words or images, heighten moods, or create musical effects. In works of the oral tradition, alliteration was also used to aid memorization. In his translation of *Beowulf*, Burton Raffel has used alliteration to suggest the sound and style of the Old English poem.

*The ancient blade broke, htt into
The monster's skin, drew blood . . .*

Look for other examples of alliteration as you read the excerpts from *Beowulf*.

ACTIVE READING MAKING JUDGMENTS

On pages 28–29, you were introduced to the characteristics shared by many **epics**. Look for evidence of these characteristics in *Beowulf*, and, on the basis of the evidence you find, **make judgments** about the ways in which the poem resembles and differs from other epics.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Use the information provided on pages 28–29 to create a chart in which you list common characteristics of epics. Then, as you read the excerpts from *Beowulf*, record evidence of the presence or absence of those characteristics in the poem. In your judgment, is *Beowulf* a typical epic?

Build Background

The Birth of the *Beowulf* Epic After the fall of the Western Roman Empire to Germanic tribes in the fifth century A.D., Europe entered a chaotic period of political unrest and economic and cultural decline. Among the Germanic-speaking tribes of northern Europe, life was dominated by frequent bloody warfare, which drove some of them to abandon their homes for foreign shores. These tribes included groups of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who settled on the island of Britain, where they established what is now called Anglo-Saxon civilization. Their famous tale of the great hero Beowulf, however, takes place on the European mainland, among two related tribes, the Danes of what is now Denmark and the Geats (gēts or gā-ets) of what is now Sweden.

Beowulf is a Geat warrior who crosses the sea to aid the Danes and later returns to Sweden to succeed his uncle Hygelac (the Higlac of this translation) as king of the Geats. While we cannot be sure whether Beowulf ever really lived, we do know that Hygelac was a historical figure who led a military raid some time around the year 525. The action of *Beowulf* is presumably set not long afterward.

At that time, the northern Germanic societies had not yet adopted Christianity. Their warrior culture celebrated loyalty and deeds of great strength and courage. For entertainment the people gathered in mead halls, large wooden buildings where they feasted, drank mead (an alcoholic beverage), and listened to tales of heroic achievements. Such tales were presented both in the form of long epic poems and in the form of shorter verse narratives. Poet-singers—called scop (shōps) in Anglo-Saxon society—recited the poems in a chanting voice, usually accompanying themselves on a harp.

Old English Text *Beowulf* is the most famous of the early Germanic heroic poems that survive. The form of the poem that has come down to us dates from sometime between the eighth



and tenth centuries—after the Anglo-Saxons' conversion to Christianity. It is written in Old English, the language spoken in Britain in the Anglo-Saxon period. As the lines shown below illustrate, Old English neither looks nor sounds like Modern English, and it must therefore be translated for most modern readers.

Old English poetry has a strong rhythm, with each line divided into two parts by a pause, called a **caesura** (sī-zhōōr'ə). In the Old English text printed here, the caesuras are indicated by extra space in the lines. In his translation, Burton Raffel has often used punctuation to reproduce the effect of the caesuras.

Lines from *Beowulf* in Old English

Ða com of more under misthleopum
grendel gongan— godes yrre bær;
mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.

Modern English translation by Burton Raffel

*Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.*

from

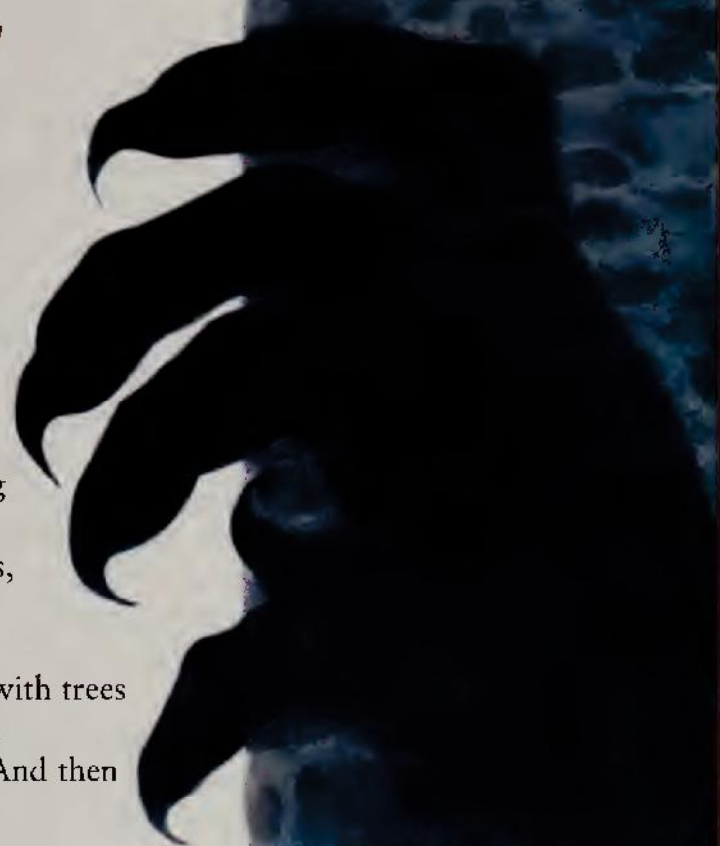
BEOWULF

WUOLF

Hrothgar (hrôth'gär'), king of the Danes, has built a wonderful mead hall called Herot (hěr'ət), where his subjects congregate and make merry. As this selection opens, a fierce and powerful monster named Grendel invades the mead hall, bringing death and destruction.

GRENDL

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall, the harp's rejoicing
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,



Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing
The beginning might not be the end. And that night
50 Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different
55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.
So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,

GUIDE FOR READING

17 **moors** (mōōrz): broad, open regions with patches of bog.

19 **spawned**: born.

21 **Cain**: the eldest son of Adam and Eve. According to the Bible (Genesis 4), he murdered his younger brother Abel.

19–29 **Who were Grendel's earliest ancestors? How did he come to exist?**

40 **lair**: the den of a wild animal.

49 **What is meant by "The beginning might not be the end"?**

58 **In what way has hate triumphed?**

Prow of ninth-century Oseberg ship

WORDS
TO
KNOW

lament (lə-měnt') *n.* an audible expression of grief; wail

60 One against many, and won; so Herot
 Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
 Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
 Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
 By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
 65 The seas, was told and sung in all
 Men's ears; how Grendel's hatred began,
 How the monster relished his savage war
 On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
 Alive, seeking no peace, offering
 70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
 In gold or land, and paying the living
 For one crime only with another. No one
 Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
 That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
 75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
 And young, lying in waiting, hidden
 In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
 Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
 So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
 80 Killing as often as he could, coming
 Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
 In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
 Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious
 Throne, protected by God—God,
 85 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat
 In secret sessions, talking of terror
 And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
 90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
 Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's
 Support, the Devil's guidance in driving
 Their affliction off. That was their way,
 And the heathen's only hope, Hell
 95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
 Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
 Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
 His praise nor know His glory. Let them
 Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
 100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
 In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
 To those who will rise to God, drop off
 Their dead bodies and seek our Father's peace!

64 What does the phrase "hell-forged hands" suggest about Grendel?

73 **reparation**: something done to make amends for loss or suffering. In Germanic society, someone who killed another person was generally expected to make a payment to the victim's family as a way of restoring peace.

84 The reference to God shows the influence of Christianity on the Beowulf Poet. What does Grendel's inability to know God's love suggest about him?

91 **heathen** (*hē'thæn*): pagan; non-Christian. Though the Beowulf Poet was a Christian, he recognized that the characters in the poem lived before the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity, when they still worshiped "the old stone gods."

WORDS
TO
KNOW

relish (*rəl'īsh*) *v.* to enjoy keenly
affliction (*ə-flīk'shən*) *n.* a cause of pain or distress

BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Hcalfdane's son
105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

104 Healfdane's son: Hrothgar.

109–110 Higlac's follower: warrior loyal to Higlac (hīg'lāk'), king of the Geats (and Beowulf's uncle).

Beowulf and his men sail over the sea to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are escorted by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows of Beowulf and is ready to welcome the young prince and his men.

125 Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:
“My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open
130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make.”
Beowulf arose, with his men
135 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly

Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
140 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:

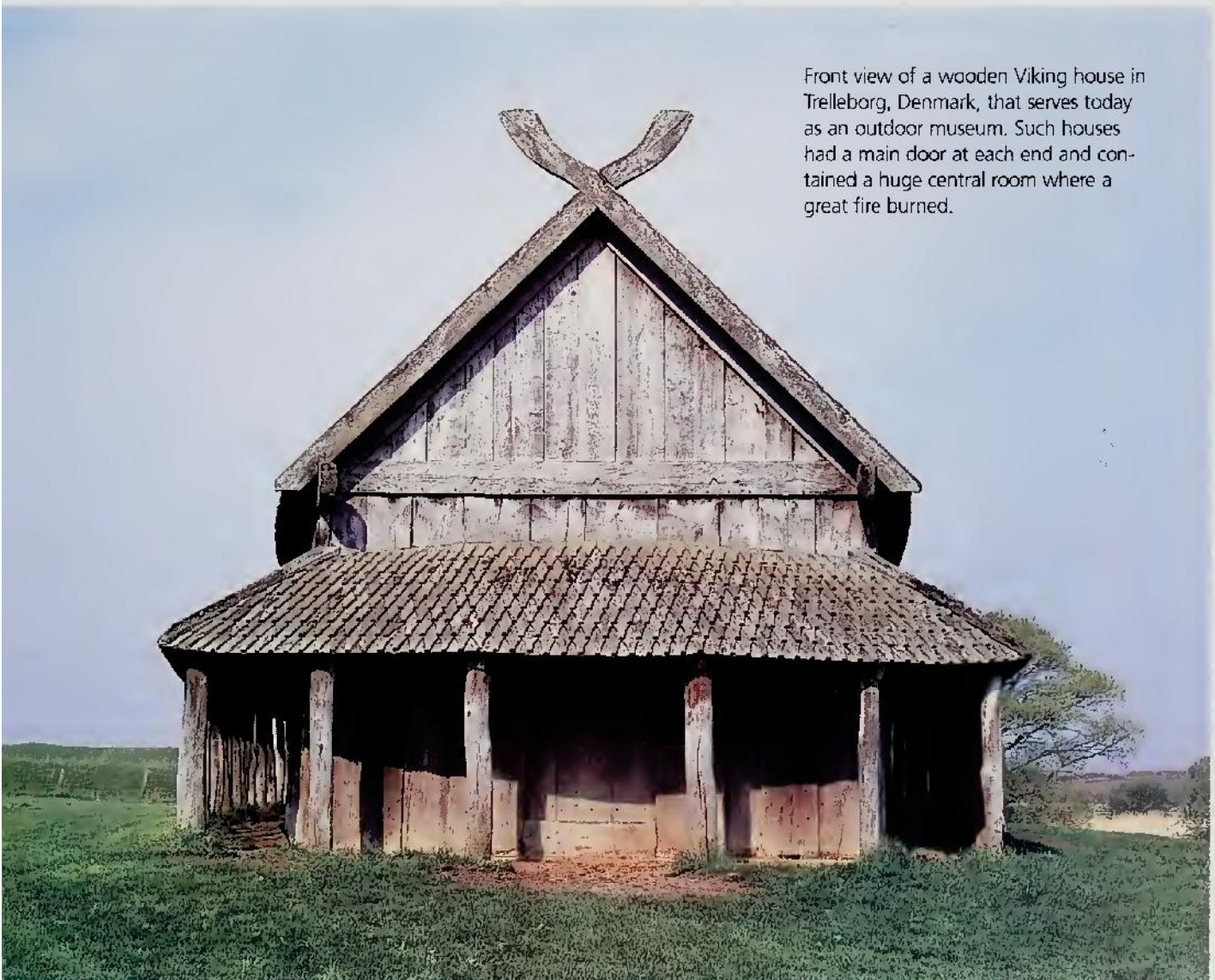
“Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,

139 mail shirt: flexible body armor made of metal links or overlapping metal scales.

140 smith's high art: the skilled craft of a blacksmith (a person who fashions objects from iron).

142 cousin: here, a general term for a relative. Beowulf is actually Higlac's nephew.



Front view of a wooden Viking house in Trelleborg, Denmark, that serves today as an outdoor museum. Such houses had a main door at each end and contained a huge central room where a great fire burned.

Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
 Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
 Five great giants into chains, chased
 155 All of that race from the earth. I swam
 In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
 Out of the ocean, and killing them one
 By one; death was my errand and the fate
 They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
 160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
 Lord and protector of this noble place,
 A single request! I have come so far,
 Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
 That this one favor you should not refuse me—
 165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
 Too, that the monster's scorn of men
 Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
 Nor will I. My lord Higlac
 170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 Behind some broad linden shield: my hands
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
 Against the monster. God must decide
 175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
 What it has been before, to invade this hall
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
 From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!"
 190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship,
 and because

172 linden shield: shield made from the wood of a linden tree.

172–174 Beowulf insists on fighting Grendel without weapons. Why do you think this is so important to him?

185 shrouds: cloths in which dead bodies are wrapped.

188 Hrethel (*hrēth'æl*): a former king of the Geats—Higlac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

189 Wayland: a famous blacksmith and magician.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

purge (pûrj) *v.* to cleanse or purify
gorge (gôrj) *v.* to stuff with food

Of the reception your father found at our court.
Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:
195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.
Then he traveled across the curving waves
To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
Then, a young man ruling this wide
200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
My older brother, a far better man
Than I, had died and dying made me,
Second among Healfdane's sons, first
In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's
205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
How many times have my men, glowing
215 With courage drawn from too many cups
Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches
220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
Still, death taking more and more.
But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future.”
225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
Yielded benches to the brave visitors
And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
Came carrying out the carved flasks,
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

193 Edgetho (ĕj'thō): Beowulf's father.

194 Wulfing: a member of another Germanic tribe.

191–206 What service did Hrothgar perform for Beowulf's father?



Reconstruction of helmet from Sutton Hoo ship burial

After the banquet, Hrothgar and his followers leave Herot, and Beowulf and his warriors remain to spend the night. Beowulf reiterates his intent to fight Grendel without a sword and, while his followers sleep, lies waiting, eager for Grendel to appear.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
235 Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
240 Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

233–235 The translator uses punctuation to convey the effect of the midline pauses in the original Old English verses. How does the rhythm created by the midline punctuation reinforce the account of the action here?

So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
 245 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
 And rushed angrily over the threshold.
 He strode quickly across the inlaid
 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
 250 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
 With rows of young soldiers resting together.
 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
 Intended to tear the life from those bodies
 255 By morning; the monster's mind was hot
 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
 Of his last human supper. Human
 260 Eyes were watching his evil steps,
 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
 He came to, ripped him apart, cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 265 Drank the blood from his veins and bolted
 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 270 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
 —And was instantly seized himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth
 275 Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
 His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
 280 This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
 But Higlac's follower remembered his final
 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
 The monster's flight, fastened those claws
 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 285 Closer. The infamous killer fought

246 threshold: the strip of wood
 or stone at the bottom of a
 doorway.

WORDS
 TO
 KNOW

talon (tāl'ən) *n.* a claw
infamous (ɪn'fə-məs) *adj.* having a bad reputation; notorious

And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
330 To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
335 Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
340 And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
345 Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
350 Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
355 By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

338 sinews (sīn'yōōz): the tendons that connect muscles to bones.

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
360 Herot, warriors coming to that hall
From faraway lands, princes and leaders
Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
365 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
And already weary of his vanishing life.

355-358 Why do you think Beowulf hangs Grendel's arm from the rafters?

The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 370 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 Surf had covered his death, hidden
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.
 375 Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 380 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 On earth or under the spreading sky
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
 385 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)
 And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,
 They would let their horses race, red
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier
 390 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
 And could sing them all through, story after story,
 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
 395 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well. . . .

389–396 What role do poets seem to play in Beowulf's society?

Thinking Through the Literature

- 1. Comprehension Check** What characteristics does Grendel have that make him particularly terrifying to the Danes?
- What impressions of Beowulf do you have after reading this part of the poem?
- What do you think causes Grendel to attack human beings?

THINK
ABOUT

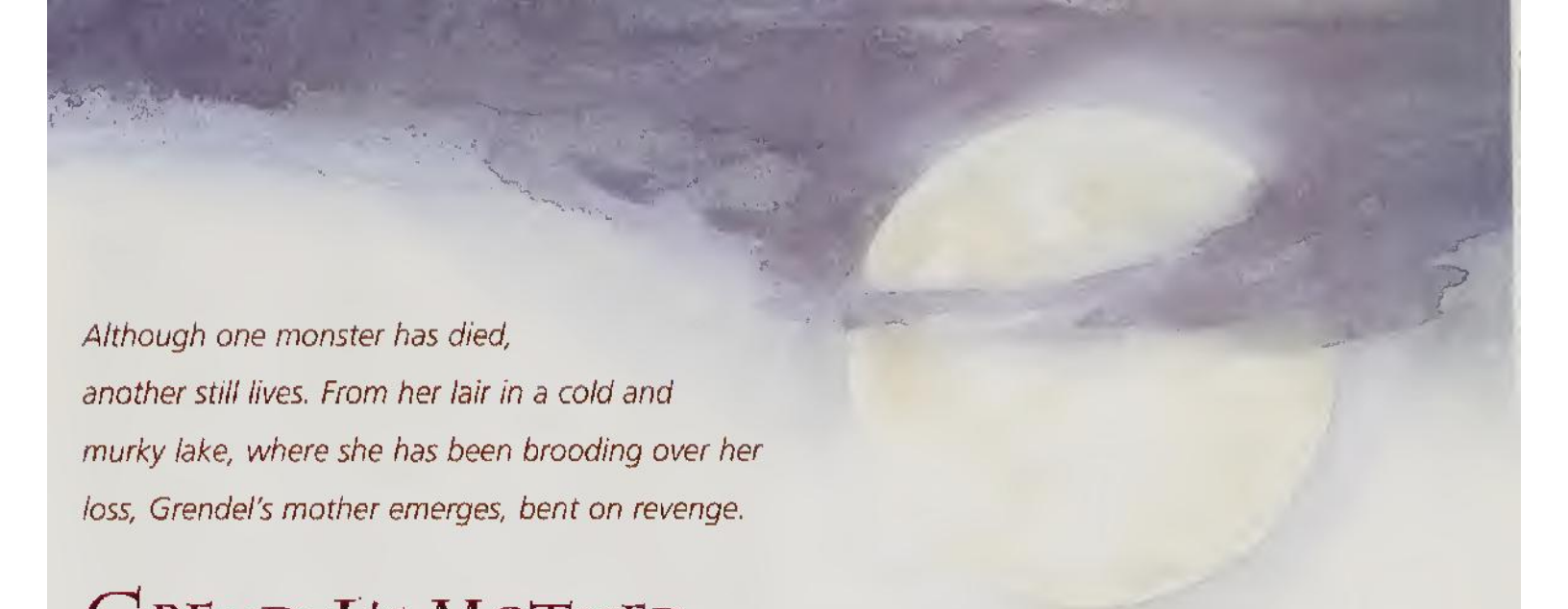
}

 - his relatives and ancestors
 - his actions and attitudes
 - the Danish warriors' reactions to him
- Why do you think Beowulf offers to help a tribe other than his own, in spite of the danger?

WORDS
TO
KNOW

murky (mur'kē) *adj.* cloudy; gloomy

pilgrimage (pīl'grē-mīj) *n.* a journey to a sacred place or with a lofty purpose



*Although one monster has died,
another still lives. From her lair in a cold and
murky lake, where she has been brooding over her
loss, Grendel's mother emerges, bent on revenge.*

GRENDL'S MOTHER

So she reached Herot,
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed
400 The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter
How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,
Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,
405 Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.
The soldiers raised their shields and drew
Those gleaming swords, swung them above
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts
And their helmets where they'd lain when the terror took
hold of them.
410 To save her life she moved still faster,
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,
Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper
Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.
She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend,
415 The man he most loved of all men on earth;
She'd killed a glorious soldier, cut
A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:
Beowulf and his band had been given better
Beds; sleep had come to them in a different
420 Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:
She had carried off Grendel's claw. Sorrow
Had returned to Denmark. They'd traded deaths,
Danes and monsters, and no one had won,
Both had lost!

400 vane: a device that turns to show the direction the wind is blowing—here associated metaphorically with luck, which is as changeable as the wind.

404 boar-headed helmets: Germanic warriors often wore helmets bearing the images of wild pigs or other fierce creatures in the hope that the images would increase their ferocity and protect them against their enemies.

421 Why do you think Grendel's mother takes his claw?

Devastated by the loss of his friend, Hrothgar sends for Beowulf and recounts what Grendel's mother has done. Then Hrothgar describes the dark lake where Grendel's mother has dwelt with her son.

425 “They live in secret places, windy
Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees
Growing out over their lake are all covered
430 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike
Roots that reach as far as the water
And help keep it dark. At night that lake
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
435 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
From faraway places, prefers to die
On those shores, refuses to save its life
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
440 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
445 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!”

425–432 What sort of place is the underwater lair of Grendel's mother? How does the translator's use of alliteration make this description more effective?

447–449 Germanic warriors placed great importance on amassing treasure as a way of acquiring fame and temporarily defeating fate.



Bronze matrix for pressed foil, cast with carved details. Björnhovda, Torstunda, Öland. 7th century A.D.

Beowulf accepts Hrothgar's challenge, and the king and his men accompany the hero to the dreadful lair of Grendel's mother. Fearlessly, Beowulf prepares to battle the terrible creature.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

450 He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
455 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
460 Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
465 Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
470 And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
Nor anything in the lake attack him through

The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw

- 475 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
480 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
485 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
490 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
Comes to the men who mean to win it
And care about nothing else! He raised
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
495 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
500 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
505 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
Edgethó's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
510 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

476 his ring-marked blade: For the battle with Grendel's mother, Beowulf has been given an heirloom sword with an intricately etched blade.

480 Hrunting (hrŭn'tŭng): the name of Beowulf's sword. (Germanic warriors' swords were possessions of such value that they were often given names.)

490–492 How important is fame to Beowulf?

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
515 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
520 And desperate, lifted it high over his head
And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
525 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
530 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
535 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
540 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
545 Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
550 All the graybeards, whispered together
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's
555 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.



Viking sword

550 graybeards: old men.

WORDS
TO **loathsome** (lōth'səm) *adj.* disgusting; hateful
KNOW

Gold torque (a collar or necklace) from Snettisham in Norfolk in eastern England, made sometime in the middle of the first century B.C.



The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
560 Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.
—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
565 Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters' hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
570 Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle's only survivor
575 Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
580 Burdens he was bringing with him. He

578 that noble protector of all seamen: Beowulf, who will be buried in a tower that will serve as a navigational aid to sailors.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

fetter (fēt'ər) *n.* a shackle or chain; restraint

And all his glorious band of Geats
 Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
 They left the lake together. The Geats
 Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.
 585 Behind them the water slowly thickened
 As the monsters' blood came seeping up.
 They walked quickly, happily, across
 Roads all of them remembered, left
 The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
 590 Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,
 Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
 Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
 Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
 That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
 595 Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
 At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
 Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
 Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
 Herot, covered with glory for the daring
 600 Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
 To salute him and show Grendel's head.
 He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
 Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
 Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
 605 And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

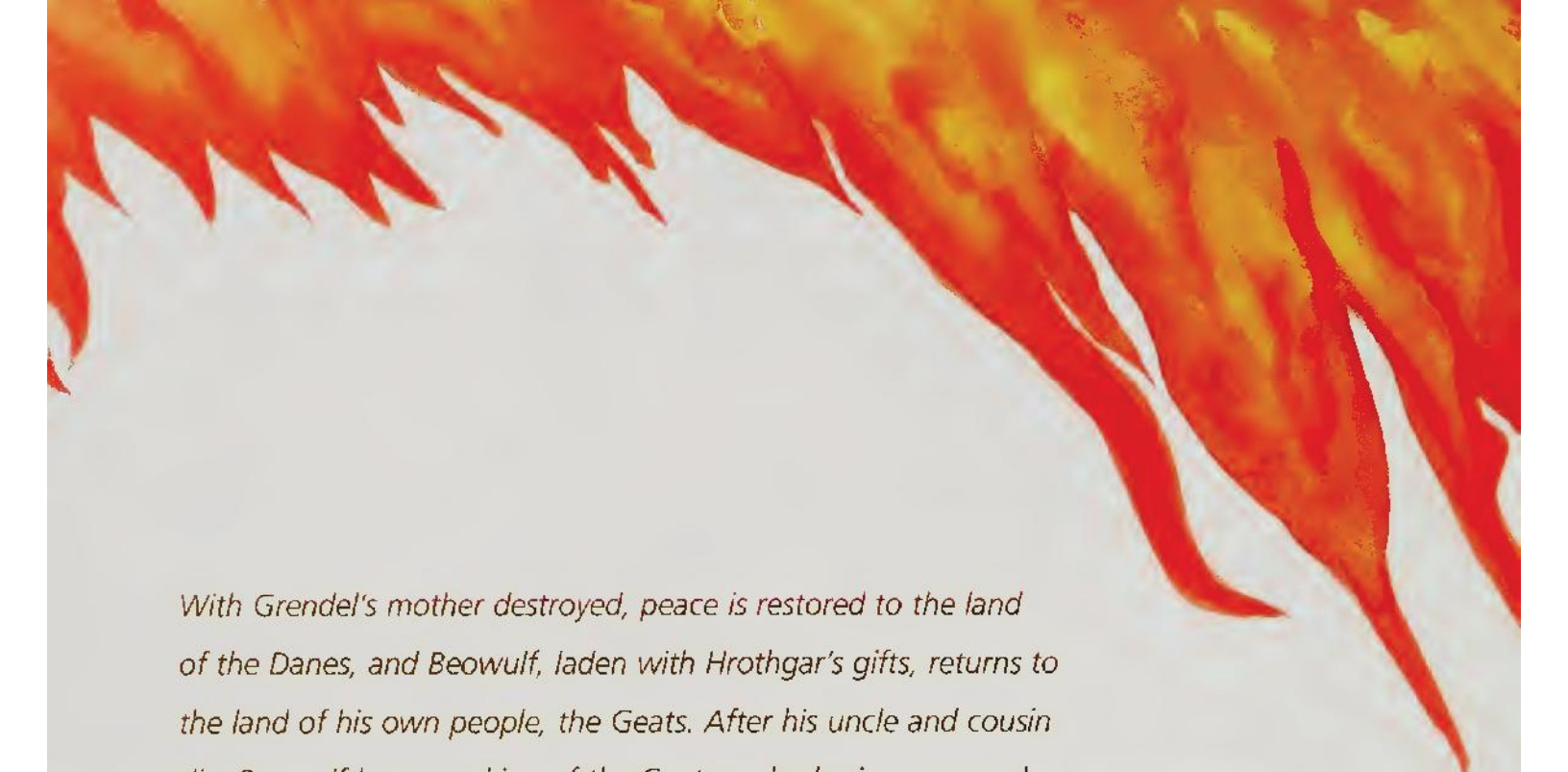
593–594 Why do you think the Geats want the Danes to see the monster's skull?

604 queen: Welthow, wife of Hrothgar.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What heroic action does Beowulf perform in this part of the poem?
2. Do you think you would have enjoyed living among the Danes of Beowulf's day? Why or why not?
3. What qualities does Beowulf display in this second battle?

THINK ABOUT	{	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the description of Grendel's mother and her actions • the details describing her lair • Beowulf's motives and actions
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4. Are Beowulf's words and deeds those of a traditional **epic hero**? Support your opinion with evidence from the poem.
5. Does the behavior of Grendel's mother seem as wicked or unreasonable as Grendel's behavior? Explain your answer.



With Grendel's mother destroyed, peace is restored to the land of the Danes, and Beowulf, laden with Hrothgar's gifts, returns to the land of his own people, the Geats. After his uncle and cousin die, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats and rules in peace and prosperity for 50 years. One day, however, a fire-breathing dragon that has been guarding a treasure for hundreds of years is disturbed by a thief, who enters the treasure tower and steals a cup. The dragon begins terrorizing the Geats, and Beowulf, now an old man, takes on the challenge of fighting it.



Viking cup, silver and gilt

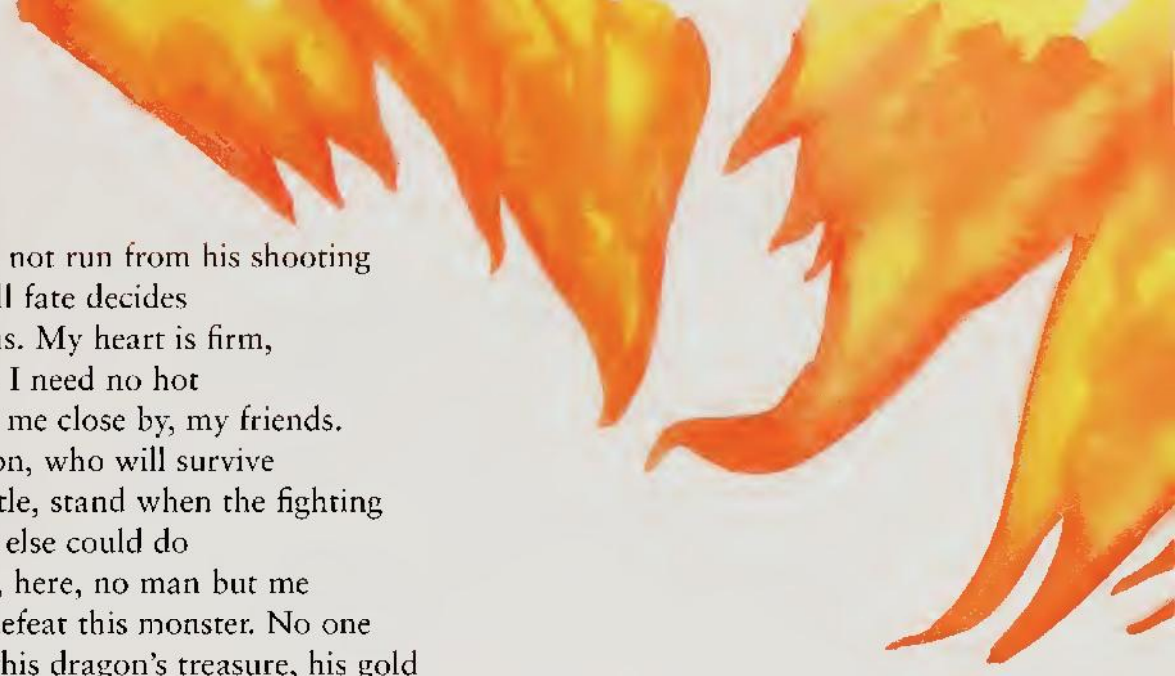
BEOWULF'S LAST BATTLE

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

“I’ve never known fear, as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
610 If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me.”

Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:

“I’d use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
615 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me



620 I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
625 We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
630 Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,
635 Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
640 Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
645 Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
650 Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
655 In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
660 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared

648 hoary (hōr'ē): gray with age.

Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
665 To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Fought with fate against him, with glory
670 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
675 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars: his weapon
680 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgeth's
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
685 Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few brief hours on earth.

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
690 Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
695 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
700 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
Armor and gold and the great estates
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's

670–671 Why do you think Beowulf keeps fighting?

678 ring-giver: king; lord. When a man swore allegiance to a Germanic lord in return for his protection, the lord typically bestowed a ring on his follower to symbolize the bond.



Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
705 Shield and drew his sword. . . .
 And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
The kind of words his comrades deserved:
 “I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
And boasting of how brave we’d be when Beowulf
710 Needed us, he who gave us these swords
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,
When the time came, kindness for kindness
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,
Chose us from all his great army, thinking
715 Our boasting words had some weight, believing
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,
720 As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men’s eyes. But those days are over and gone
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help
725 Our glorious king! By almighty God,
I’d rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we’ve slain his enemy
730 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone,
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore
735 That these swords and armor were each for us all!”

694–705 How is Wiglaf unlike Beowulf’s other subjects?

717–723 What does Wiglaf suggest is the reason Beowulf has failed to defeat the dragon?

Wiglaf joins Beowulf, who again attacks the dragon single-handed; but the remnant of his sword shatters, and the monster wounds him in the neck. Wiglaf then strikes the dragon, and he and Beowulf together finally succeed in killing the beast. Their triumph is short-lived, however, because Beowulf's wound proves to be mortal.

THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,
Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound
His string of days on earth, seen
As much as God would grant him; all worldly
740 Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
Soon:

“I'd leave my armor to my son,
Now, if God had given me an heir,
A child born of my body, his life
Created from mine. I've worn this crown
745 For fifty winters: no neighboring people
Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
Against us or talked of terror. My days
Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
For its word to be spoken, ruling as well
750 As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,
Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood
755 Born of my own family. Belovèd
Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,
But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
Bring me ancient silver, precious
760 Jewels, shining armor and gems,
Before I die. Death will be softer,
Leaving life and this people I've ruled
So long, if I look at this last of all prizes.”

737–738 What view of fate does the image of the unwinding string convey?

741–763 What values are reflected in Beowulf's speech?



Viking purse clip of gold, garnet, and glass, from Sutton Hoo ship burial

WORDS
TO KNOW
livid (lĪv'Īd) *adj.* discolored; black and blue



Gold buckle from Sutton Hoo ship burial, showing animals, snakes, and birds

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
765 As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
770 Piles of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;
775 It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden
780 Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;
785 He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,
790 Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
795 To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
Hoping his wounded king, weak
And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
800 His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
805 "For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
For all of this, that His grace has given me,
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
810 For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it
815 Here, at the water's edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."
820 Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
"You're the last of all our far-flung family.
825 Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."
The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;
830 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory. . . .
And when the battle was over Beowulf's followers
Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
835 While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's

816 spit: a narrow point of land extending into a body of water.

805–819 How will Beowulf continue to aid his people after his death?

833 In what sense are Beowulf's followers traitors? Whom or what have they betrayed?

Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,
And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
840 Near Beowulf's body, wearily sprinkling
Water in the dead man's face, trying
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
Life in their lord's body, or turned
Aside the Lord's will: world
845 And men and all move as He orders,
And always have, and always will.

Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,
850 His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
"I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. . . .

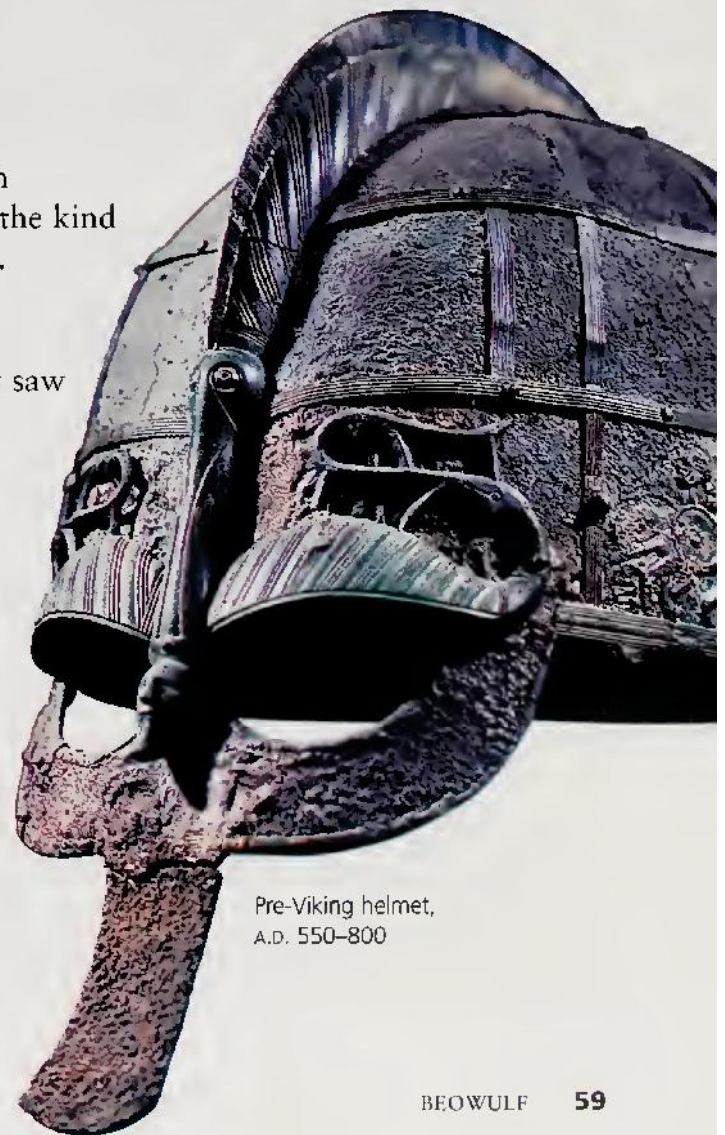
Too few of his warriors remembered
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
855 And now the giving of swords, of golden
Rings and rich estates, is over,
Ended for you and everyone who shares
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
How you bolted and ran none of your race
860 Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!" . . .

Then the warriors rose,
Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared
865 At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they saw
Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold
Ring-giver resting in his last bed;
He'd reached the end of his days, their mighty
War-king, the great lord of the Geats,
870 Gone to a glorious death. . . .

836 **javelins** (jāv'īnz): light spears used as weapons.

837 **jackals** (jāk'aiz): doglike animals that sometimes feed on the flesh of dead beasts.

859 **bolted**: ran away; fled.



Pre-Viking helmet,
A.D. 550–800

MOURNING BEOWULF

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,
875 Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all
880 The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats
885 Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
890 Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
895 Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.



Ornamental bird used as decoration on a shield, from the Sutton Hoo ship burial

896 **mild:** gentle or kindly. Do you agree that Beowulf was a mild ruler? Why or why not?

A COLLABORATION ACROSS 1,200 YEARS

Review by D. J. R. Bruckner

A Modern Scop Listening to the story of Beowulf sung by a scop playing a harp is no longer an experience confined to the past. American musician and medieval scholar Benjamin Bagby has begun performing Beowulf in the original Anglo-Saxon to enthusiastic audiences. Bagby likens Beowulf to a "campfire ghost story" and compares his performances to rap and jazz, both of which involve improvisation and spontaneity. The following review, written in 1997, captures the excitement of Bagby's Beowulf.



European noblemen of a thousand years ago had much more exciting and intelligent entertainment than anything to be found now. Anyone who doubts that need only look in on Benjamin Bagby's astonishing performance of the first quarter of the epic poem *Beowulf*—in Anglo-Saxon, no less—tonight at the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center. It will be the last of his three appearances in the Lincoln Center Festival.

From the moment he strode on stage on Sunday for the opening night, silencing the audience with that famous first word, "Hwaet!" ("Pay attention!"), until hell swallowed the "pagan soul" of the monster's maw, there were bursts of laughter, mutters and sighs, and when Mr. Bagby's voice stopped at the end, as abruptly as it had begun, there

was an audible rippling gasp before a thunderclap of applause from cheering people who called him back again and again, unwilling to let him go.

Mr. Bagby—a Midwesterner who fell in love with *Beowulf* at 12 and who now is co-director of a medieval music ensemble, Sequentia, in Cologne, Germany—accompanies himself on a six-string lyre modeled on one found in a seventh-century tomb near Stuttgart. This surprisingly facile instrument underscores the meter of the epic verses and is counterpoint to Mr. Bagby's voice as he recites, chants and occasionally sings the lines.

On the whole, this is a restrained presentation. The performer captures listeners at once simply by letting us feel his conviction that he has a tale to tell that is more captivating than