

A Collaboration Across 1,200 Years

D.J.R. BRUCKNER

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. . . .

From the moment he strode onstage 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 Grendel eighty minutes later, Mr. Bagby came as close to holding hundreds of people in a spell as ever a man has. As the epic's warriors argued, boasted, fought, or fell into 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



Benjamin Bagby reciting the story of *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon.

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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 twelve . . .—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.

. . . A translation is handed out to the audience, but after a while one notices people are following it less and just letting the sound of this strange and beautiful language wash over them. Perhaps not so strange, after all—enough phrases begin to penetrate the understanding that one finally knows deep down that, yes, this is where English came from.

—*The New York Times*, July 22, 1997

Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where Grendel's mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he dives to the depths of this watery hell.

The Monster's Mother

12

- 570 . . . 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
575 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,
580 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
585 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,
590 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
595 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
600 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;
605 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
610 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.
615 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
620 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



Battersea shield.

© British Museum, London.

625 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,
Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
630 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

13

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
635 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,^o
And then, savage, now, angry
640 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
645 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
650 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
655 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
660 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
665 Jerked for the last time, then lay still. . . .

638. scabbard . . . hilt: A scabbard is a case that holds the blade of a sword; a hilt is a sword's handle.

WORDS TO OWN

loathsome (lōth'səm) *adj.*: disgusting.

Beowulf carries Grendel's head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon's hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats' land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon's lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf, the price of this last victory will be great.

The Final Battle

14

... 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

670 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

675 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.

680 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

685 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,

690 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

695 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'

700 Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,



Dragonesque brooch
(2nd century).
Romano-British.

© British Museum, London.

A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary° rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,

703. hoary (hōr'ē): ancient.

705 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

710 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

715 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying

720 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

725 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into

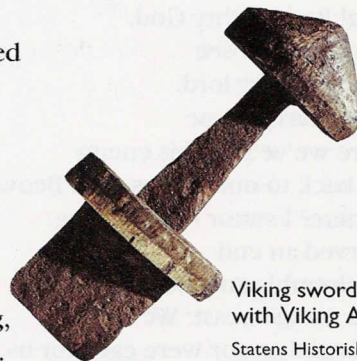
730 The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him

735 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

740 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
745 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

745 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
750 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.



Viking sword handles, embellished
with Viking Age motifs.

Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.



Detail of three-ringed gold collar
(6th century).

Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

15

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
755 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
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
760 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
765 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
770 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,
775 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
780 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
785 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
790 That these swords and armor were each for us all!" . . .

Together, Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster's treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon's cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

16

... Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
Hoping his wounded king, weak
795 And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words
800 Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
 "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,
805 Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
 Still came to my lips. I sold my life
 For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
 What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
 Help them; my time is gone. Have
810 The brave Geats build me a tomb,
 When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it
 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
815 Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
 And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."
 Then that brave king gave the golden
 Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
 Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
820 And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
 "You're the last of all our far-flung family.
 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."
825 The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
 No more, had said as much as it could;
 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
 Left his flesh, flew to glory.

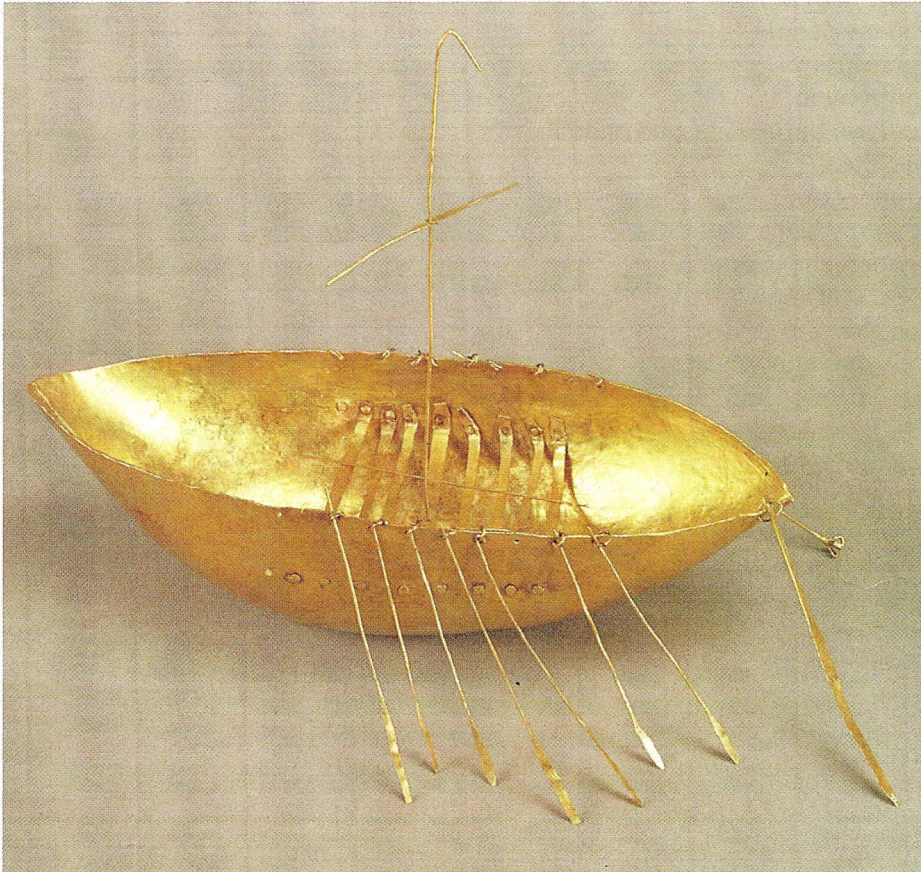
Gilded bronze and ivory casket.
National Museum, Copenhagen.



Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow, the Geats then cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon's treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.

17

... And then twelve of the bravest Geats
830 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
835 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,
840 Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.



Gold boat (probably 1st century) found at Brough, County Londonderry, Ireland.

National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

Life in 999: A Grim Struggle

HOWARD G. CHUA-EOAN

Today's world is measured in light-years and Mach speed and sheathed in silicon and alloy. In the world of 999, on the eve of the first millennium, time moved at the speed of an oxcart or, more often, of a sturdy pair of legs, and the West was built largely on wood. Europe was a collection of untamed forests, countless mile upon mile of trees and brush and brier, dark and inhospitable. Medieval chroniclers used the word *desert* to describe their arboreal world, a place on the cusp of civilization where werewolves and bogeymen still lunged out of the shadows and bandits and marauders maintained their lairs.

Yet the forests, deep and dangerous as they were, also defined existence. Wood kindled forges and kept alive the hearths of the mud-and-thatch huts of the serfs. Peasants fattened their hogs on forest acorns (pork was crucial to basic subsistence in the cold of winter), and wild berries helped supplement the meager diet. In a world without sugar, honey from forest swarms provided the only sweetness for food or drink. The pleasures of the serfs were few and simple: earthy lovemaking and occasional dances and fests.

Feudal lords ruled over western Europe, taking their share of the harvests of primitive agriculture and making the forests their private hunting grounds. Poaching was not simply theft (usually punishable by imprisonment) but a sin against the social order. Without the indulgence of the

nobility, the peasants could not even acquire salt, the indispensable ingredient for preserving meat and flavoring a culinary culture that possessed few spices. Though a true money economy did not exist, salt could be bought with poorly circulated coin, which the lord hoarded in his castle and dispensed to the poor only as alms.

It was in the lord's castle too that peasants and their flocks sought refuge from wolf packs and barbarian invaders. In 999, however, castles, like most other buildings in Europe, were made of timber, far from the granite bastions that litter today's imagined Middle Ages. The peasants, meanwhile, were relegated to their simple huts, where everyone—including the animals—slept around the hearth. Straw was scattered on the floors to collect scraps as well as human and animal waste. Housecleaning consisted of sweeping out the straw.

Illness and disease remained in constant residence. Tuberculosis was endemic, and so were scabrous skin diseases of every kind: abscesses, cankers, scrofula, tumors, eczema, and erysipelas. In a throwback to biblical times, lepers constituted a class of pariahs living on the outskirts of villages and cities. Constant famine, rotten flour, and vitamin deficiencies afflicted huge segments of society with blindness, goiter, paralysis, and bone malformations that created hunchbacks and cripples. A man was lucky to survive 30, and 50 was a ripe old age. Most women, many of them succumbing to the ravages of childbirth,

lived less than 30 years. There was no time for what is now considered childhood; children of every class had to grow up immediately and be useful as soon as possible. Emperors were leading armies in their teens; John XI became Pope at the age of 21.

While the general population was growing faster than it had in the previous five centuries, there was still a shortage of people to cultivate the fields, clear the woodlands, and work the mills. Local taxes were levied on youths who did not marry upon coming of age. Abortion was considered homicide, and a woman who terminated a pregnancy was expelled from the church.

The nobility spent its waking hours battling foes to preserve its prerogatives, the clergy chanting prayers for the salvation of souls, the serfs laboring to feed and clothe everyone. Night, lit only by burning logs or the rare taper, was always filled with danger and terror. The seasons came and went, punctuated chiefly by the occurrence of plentiful church holidays. The calendar year began at different times for different regions; only later would Europe settle on the Feast of Christ's Circumcision, January 1, as the year's beginning.

Thus there was little panic, not even much interest, as the millennium approached in the final months of 999. For what terrors could the apocalypse hold for a continent that was already shrouded in darkness? Rather Europe—illiterate, diseased, and hungry—seemed grimly resigned to desperation and impoverishment. It was one of the planet's most unpromising corners, the Third World of its age.

—from *Time*

Beowulf Shrinklet

Hrothgar and Grendel could not get along;
the populace thought the killing was wrong.

Beowulf, the hero from o'er the sea,
from monster or dragon he would not flee.

"If treasure I wanteth," the hero thought,
"then I will journey to the great Herot."

Grendel died at the end of the battle.
His mother enraged (and all but little)
wanted revenge for her beloved son,
but the great bold hero ended her fun.

For proof he carried the head and the
sword,

and traveled back with troops for a reward.

The great Beowulf returned to his home,
over the oceans on seaweed and foam.

His conscience lived happily as the king.
He died at the hands of another thing.

—Calen Wood
Bakersfield High School
Bakersfield, California

Shaping Interpretations

2. A hoarded treasure in Old English literature usually **symbolizes** spiritual death or damnation. How does this fact add significance to Beowulf's last fight with the dragon?
3. What details describe the dragon? Keeping those details in mind, explain what the dragon might **symbolize** as Beowulf's final foe.
4. Beowulf battles Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. What do these battles have in common, and what do they suggest Beowulf and his enemies might represent for the Anglo-Saxons?
5. Given what you know about the structure of Anglo-Saxon society, explain what is especially ominous about the behavior of Beowulf's men during the final battle. What does this suggest about the future of the kingdom?
6. The epic closes on a somber, elegiac note—a note of mourning. What words or **images** contribute to this **tone**?
7. Epic poetry usually embodies the attitudes and ideals of an entire culture. What values of Anglo-Saxon society does *Beowulf* reveal? What universal **themes** does it also reveal?

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts

1. Beowulf's story is an ancient one, more than one thousand years old. Did its age make it entirely alien to you, or did you find that it deals with issues or themes that seem relevant in our modern society as well? If so, what are they?

Reading Check

- a. Describe how Beowulf manages to kill Grendel's mother.
- b. Who comes to Beowulf's aid in his final battle with the dragon? Why does he help Beowulf?
- c. What sad scene concludes the epic?
- d. What happens to the dragon's hoard?

Extending the Text

8. How would we tell a hero story today? What would the **setting** be, what would the **enemy** be, and what **values** would the hero embody?
9. The *Connections* on page 47, "Life in 999: A Grim Struggle," describes daily life in late Anglo-Saxon England. How does this picture of daily life relate to what you've read in *Beowulf*—and to how you live today?
10. In the last episode of the epic, the leader's followers mourn his passing and praise his life. What qualities do we look for in leaders today—are they the same qualities Beowulf's people loved him for?

Challenging the Text

11. What do you think of the way women are portrayed in (or absent from) *Beowulf*?

Alliteration and Kennings: Taking the Burden off the Bard

The *Connections* on page 39 shows that the oral tradition is still alive and still a powerful way of communicating from poet to audience.

The Anglo-Saxon oral poet was assisted by two poetic devices, alliteration and the kenning.

Alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of sounds in words close to one another. Anglo-Saxon poetry is often called alliterative poetry. Instead of rhyme unifying the poem, the verse line is divided into two halves separated by a rhythmical pause, or **caesura**. In the first half of the line before the caesura, two words alliterate; in the second half, one word alliterates with the two from the first half. Many lines, however, have only two alliterative words, one in each half of the poetic line. Notice the alliterative *g* and the four primary stresses in this Old English line from *Beowulf*:

God mid Géatum Gréndles daeda

Kennings. The kenning, a specialized metaphor made of compound words, is a staple of Anglo-Saxon literature that still finds a place in our language today. *Gas guzzler* and *headhunter* are two modern-day kennings you are likely to have heard.

The earliest and simplest kennings are compound words formed of two common nouns: “sky-candle” for *sun*, “battle-dew” for *blood*, and “whale-road” for *sea*. Later, kennings grew more elaborate, and compound adjectives joined the compound nouns. A ship became a “foamy-throated ship,” then a “foamy-throated sea-stallion,” and finally a “foamy-throated stallion of the whale-road.” Once a kenning was coined, it was used by the singer-poets over and over again.

In their original languages, kennings are almost always written as simple compounds, with no hyphens or spaces between the words. In translation, however, kennings are often written as hyphenated compounds (“sky-candle,” “foamy-throated”), as prepositional phrases (“wolf of wounds”), or as possessives (“the sword’s tree”).

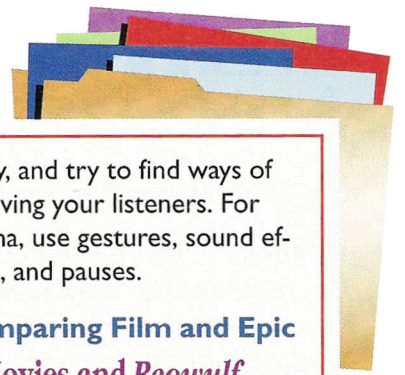
The work of kennings. Scholars believe that kennings filled three needs: (1) Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry depended heavily on alliteration, but neither language had a large vocabulary. Poets created the alliterative words they needed by combining existing words. (2) Because the poetry was oral and had to be memorized, bards valued ready-made phrases. Such phrases made finished poetry easier to remember, and they gave bards time to think ahead when they were composing new poetry on the spot during a feast or ceremony. (3) The increasingly complex structure of the kennings must have satisfied the early Norse and Anglo-Saxon people’s taste for elaboration.

Analyzing the text. As you examine these poetic devices, be sure to listen to the way they sound.

1. Read aloud the account of Beowulf’s death (lines 791–828), and listen for the effects of the alliteration. Where are **vowels**, rather than consonants, repeated?
2. Look back over lines 233–391 from *Beowulf*. Locate at least two examples of kennings written as **hyphenated compounds**, two examples of kennings written as **prepositional phrases**, and two examples of kennings written as **possessives**. What does each kenning refer to?
3. Compile a list of modern-day kennings, such as *headhunter*.
4. Translators differ dramatically in how they rephrase the Old English to handle alliteration and the kennings. Here is a passage from a translation done many years before the Raffel translation. How does it compare with the corresponding lines (392–398) in Raffel’s translation? Which translation sounds more modern? Which do you prefer to listen to?

Now Grendel came, from his crags of mist
Across the moor; he was curst of God.
The murderous prowler meant to surprise
In the high-built hall his human prey.
He stalked neath the clouds, till steep before him
The house of revelry rose in his path,
The gold-hall of heroes, the gaily adorned.

—translated by J. Duncan Spaeth



Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for a Literary Analysis

At the end of this collection, you'll write a literary analysis. When you analyze a literary work, you usually focus on some element in the selection that interests you. You then analyze, or "take apart," the element to see how it works in the text. To start collecting ideas for an analysis, focus now on the **character** of Grendel, the monster. Look back over the passages in *Beowulf* that describe Grendel, and gather evidence on how he is described. Consider these questions: How does the storyteller, in the words he uses to describe the creature, also shape our feelings toward him? What accounts for Grendel's evil? What does Grendel seem to represent in the story? Save your work for later use.



Autobiographical Incident

2. Facing Monsters

Write a brief narrative in which you tell about a time when you, like *Beowulf*, faced an intense physical challenge, or were taunted over some-

thing you said or did, or had to overcome fear to do something that had to be done. Remember that a narrative tells of a series of related events. Give your narrative a strong ending.

Creative Writing

3. It's All in the Point of View

Just as John Gardner tried imagining this story from Grendel's point of view (see **Connections** on page 36), you might try retelling an episode from the perspective of one of the other characters, perhaps Grendel, his mother, the dragon, Hrothgar, or *Beowulf's* detractor, Unferth.

Speaking and Listening

4. Being a Bard

Retell an episode of *Beowulf* for your classmates, or, if it can be arranged, for a grade-school audience. Be faithful to the plot of the story, but feel free to change or adapt the content to fit your audience and your own storytelling talents. (See, for example, the story of *Beowulf* told in shrinklet format on page 48.) Plan an introduction to your

story, and try to find ways of involving your listeners. For drama, use gestures, sound effects, and pauses.

Comparing Film and Epic

5. Movies and *Beowulf*

Movies, the cornerstone of American entertainment, often rely on familiar images: Heroes face villains to do battle in all kinds of places—from the ordinary to the strange. In a brief essay, compare and contrast *Beowulf* with some action movie you know well. Use the following questions to guide your comparison:

- Where does each hero come from?
- Who are the hero's trusted aides?
- What role does violence play in the story?
- How does the hero struggle against evil?
- Is the hero an outsider or a part of the community?
- What rewards or glory does the hero receive?

Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* (1977).

