




Beowulf

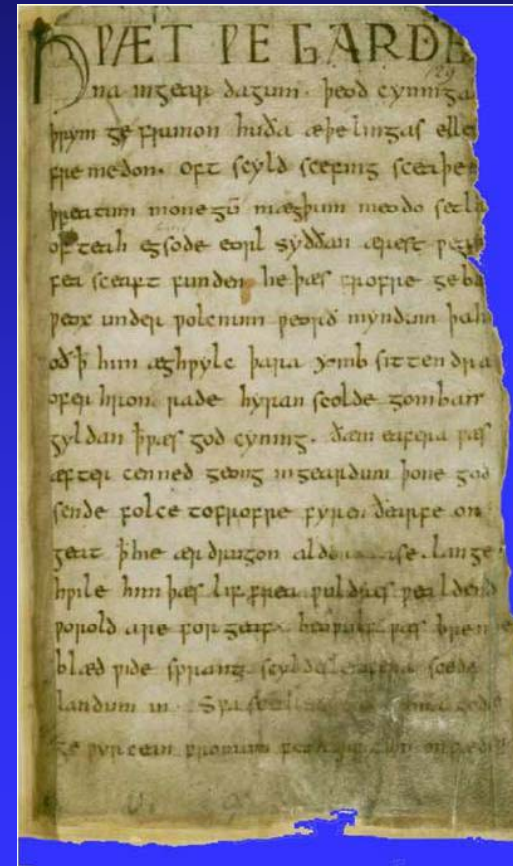
I. Historical background

- 400-600 A.D. -- Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invade (*Beowulf* set)
- 410 A.D. – Rome renounces control of Britain
- 521 A.D. – Hygelac invades the Netherlands
- 597 A.D. – St. Augustine
- 625 A.D. – Sutton Hoo
- 700-950 A.D. -- Christian poet composed the poem



II. The manuscript

- Handwritten by a monk around 1000 A.D.
- Written in Old English 
- Obtained by Sir Robert Cotton
- Bound in Cotton Vitellius A.15.
- Damaged in fire in 1731
- Currently at British Museum
- Available on “The Electronic Beowulf” CD



III. Poetic form and devices

- Alliterative verse
 - ◆ Same initial consonants
 - ◆ Line halved by caesura
 - ◆ Four stresses per line
- Kenning: compressed metaphor
- Litotes: ironic understatement
- Synecdoche: part for whole
- Metonymy: associated word for word itself



IV. Anglo-Saxon values

- Loyalty
 - ◆ Fighting for one's king
 - ◆ Avenging one's kinsmen
 - ◆ Keeping one's word
- Generosity -- gifts symbolize bonds
- Brotherly love -- not romantic love
- Heroism
 - ◆ Physical strength
 - ◆ Skill and resourcefulness in battle
 - ◆ Courage
- Public reputation, not private conscience



V. *Beowulf* vocabulary

- Comitatus: Germanic warrior band (Tacitus)
- Scop: poet in oral culture (“shaper”)
 - ◆ Preserves history
 - ◆ Entertains court
 - ◆ Spreads hero’s fame
- Thane (thegn): warrior retainer
- Wergild: “man-price”
 - ◆ Substitute for violence
 - ◆ (G won’t pay; H pays for B’s father; paid for Hondscioh; Hrethel can’t get)
- Wyrd: fate (to the POET = God’s will)



VI. The structure of the poem

- Three fights (Rogers 1955)
 - ◆ Grendel
 - ◆ Grendel's mother
 - ◆ The dragon
- Ring structure (Niles 1983)
 - ◆ Individual passages
 - ◆ Three main combats
 - ◆ Example
 - ◆ Poem as a whole
- Inside/order vs. outside/chaos
 - ◆ Heorot



VII. Why the digressions?

- To show transience of peace, problem of human evil (Wright, Camargo)
- To lament loss of community (Niles)
- To introduce Christian perspective to audience, but not to characters (Osborne)
- List of digressions



VIII. The narrator's function

- Historicizing -- customs change (178 ff., 1195-6, 1797-8, 1955-6, 2773-4)
- Contemporizing -- man's place in the universe doesn't change (700-702, 1056-8, 1132-4, 1610-11, 2857-9)
- Commenting on morality – we learn from the past (20-25, 1534-6, 2166-9, 2168-9, 2541, 2600-01, 3174-5)
- Putting humanity in perspective -- human knowledge is limited (50-52, 159-63) (Greenfield 1976)



IX. What about the women?

- Women make peace, bearing children who create blood ties
 - ◆ Wealtheow unites Danes/Helmings
 - ◆ Hildeburh unites Danes/Frisians
 - ◆ Freawaru intended to unite Danes/Heathobards
- Women pass the cup at the mead-hall, cementing social bonds
- Women lament loss, don't avenge



X. What is heroism?

- Strong will?
- Valor in battle?
- Concern for others?

Are the same traits required for a warrior and for a king?



XI. Is Beowulf a hero?

- Does Beowulf act for selfish motives – glory? treasure?
- Does Beowulf act for selfless motives – preserving the community?
- Does Beowulf ever make a raid or start a feud?
- Does B stand for violence or civilization?
- Is Beowulf successful as a warrior? As a king?



XII. What is the poet's attitude toward the culture?

- Does the poet celebrate the culture he depicts and mourn its loss?
- Does he view it as limited and inferior to another alternative, perhaps Christianity?
 - ◆ It affirms vengeance
 - ◆ It overvalues glory
 - ◆ It depends on a hero



References