

The geography of *Beowulf*.
Redrawn after F. Klaeber,
Beowulf

from **Beowulf** Translated by Burton Raffel

English literature begins with *Beowulf*. It is England's heroic epic, a proper beginning for a national literature, but it belongs to everyone because it is profoundly human. The poem shapes and interprets materials connected with the tribes from northern Europe, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who invaded England after the Romans left in the fifth century. Their tribal history is in the poem. It is remote, even monstrous, and yet familiar: "keeping the bloody feud/Alive . . . and paying the living / For one crime only with another" (lines 68-72). It is a history of festering pride, loud talk, and drunken violence, of spies, bloody borders, and raids. But against this dark background the poem presents another kind of history. It is a history in which a stranger comes openly to help rather than covertly to kill and loot, in which eating and drinking and speaking and gift-giving are natural ceremonies uniting young and old; in which heroic strength is wise and generous. It is a history of ideal possibilities.

The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* dates from around 1000, but the work itself was probably composed sometime during the eighth century. The poem, which recounts the exploits of third- or fourth-century Geats and Danes (see map above), is doubtless based on earlier unwritten stories that had been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Anglo-Saxons of Britain shared a common group of heroes with other Germanic peoples, and the hero *Beowulf* certainly has his origins in an earlier, pagan era. The author of the written version that has come down to us seems to have been a Christian. The language of this version is Old English. The translation you will read in Modern English is by the poet Burton Raffel.

Beowulf, like all epic poems, is about a hero who is leader of his people. The action is extraordinary, the hero larger than life. The diction is stately and many of its scenes – the banquet, the battle, the boast, the voyage, and the funeral – are traditional. The general tone of the poem is somber, owing to a vision of evil in the world, a belief in the power of Fate (*Wyrd* is the Old English word for it) to rule human destiny, and resignation to the certainty of death.

The first selection begins during a banquet given by the Danish king, Hrothgar (*hřōth'gār*) in a new mead-hall called Herot, to commemorate his victories. The mead-hall (or banqueting-hall) is so called because of a popular drink, mead, a fermented liquor made of water, honey, malt, and yeast, which was drunk at banquets and celebrations. Herot is also intended to be a place of peace and community. It is a symbol of the loyalty and interdependence of the lord and his faithful warriors. However, Fate has the monster Grendel in store for the Danes.

com þæt he ða ðe ne hea þeowon
de fæstian cūmen of eorðas
sangs seara lāde þa we ylde tan oð
mezas. beowulf nemad hy hean
synz þæt he feoden min wif þe meoð
poðum wuxlan nodu him wean
se weoh ðimra se ðe eorðas glædmas
hwod gar hy on pis se eapum wif
pnead. eorla se æhtan hys se
al doþ deah se þe he heaðo pūcum
hider wifade.

VI.

Hwod gar ma þe lode helm se ylding
ie hne eide em he pesende þæt he
eald fæder ees þe he haren ðam to hā
for sear hie þe seara angan dohtor
is þis eapum nu heað he cūmen
se hec holdne pine. ðonne se ðon þ
sæliþende þa ðe sear eal seara
fype don þy ðe to þe se þe he

Page from the *Beowulf* manuscript (c. 1000), Cotton MS. Vitellius A.XV, fol. 140r. Courtesy, British Library

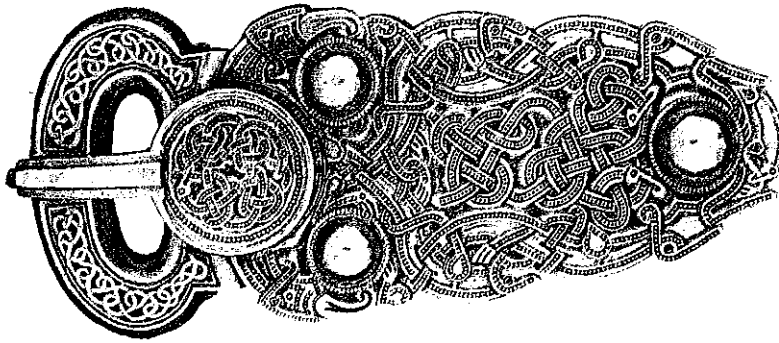
The Coming of Grendel

A powerful monster, living down
 In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
 As day after day the music rang
 Loud in that hall,^o the harp's rejoicing
 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung 5
 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
 To glow across the land and light it; 10
 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:
 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall 15
 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,
 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born 20
 Of Cain,^o 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,
 Shut away from men; they split 25
 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.

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel 30
 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
 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws: 35
 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
 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter. 40

4. **hall:** Herot. 21. **Cain:** Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, was cursed by God for slaying his brother Abel. There was a tradition that Cain sired a family of monsters. See the Biblical story in Genesis 4.

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
 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning 45
 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
 Grendel came again, so set 50
 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
 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find, 55
 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,
 One against many, and won; so Herot 60
 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
 The seas, was told and sung in all 65
 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
 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price 70
 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,
 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old 75
 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,
 Killing as often as he could, coming 80
 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,
 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's 85
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat



Interlaced gold
belt buckle, Sutton Hoo.
Courtesy, British Museum

In secret sessions, talking of terror
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods. 90
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
Always in their hearts, knowing neither God 95
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!

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son^o 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^o 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,

104. **Healfdane's son** (hā'ālf-dēn-nə): Hrothgar. The word means "half-dane." Healfdane's mother was a foreigner. 109. **Higlac** (hīg'ə-lāk): king of the Geats. He is Beowulf's feudal lord and his uncle.

And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
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.

120

The Coming of Beowulf

When he reaches the Danish shore, Beowulf explains his mission to the alert watchman, who receives him courteously, posts a guard to protect his ship, and leads him and his men to Herot. There he is welcomed by the noble Wulfgar and presented to King Hrothgar.

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
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."

125

Beowulf arose, with his men
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
Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:

130

"Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin^o and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
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

145



Reconstructed helmet
with gold ornament,
Sutton Hoo.
Courtesy, British Museum

142. *cousin*: a general term for a relative.

And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes' 150
 Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
 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,
 O 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!"

Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats, 190
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors

172. **linden**: Beowulf's shield is made of linden wood, a very sturdy wood similar to North American basswood. 189. **Wayland** (wā'lānd): a blacksmith celebrated in many surviving Germanic poems. His workmanship was of the finest, and only aristocrats could afford it.

And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
Came carrying out the carved flasks,
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
Sang, from time to time, in a clear
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

195

There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
Hrothgar's gold-ringed^o queen, greeted
The warriors; a noble woman who knew
What was right, she raised a flowing cup
To Hrothgar first, holding it high
For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
Joy in that feast. The famous king
Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf's
Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'
Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
For allowing her hands the happy duty
Of offering mead to a hero who would help
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
Edgeth's brave son, then assured the Danish
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
Ready:

200

205

210

215

"When we crossed the sea, my comrades
And I, I already knew that all
My purpose was this: to win the good will
Of your people or die in battle, pressed
In Grendel's fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
And courage, or here in this hall welcome
My death!"

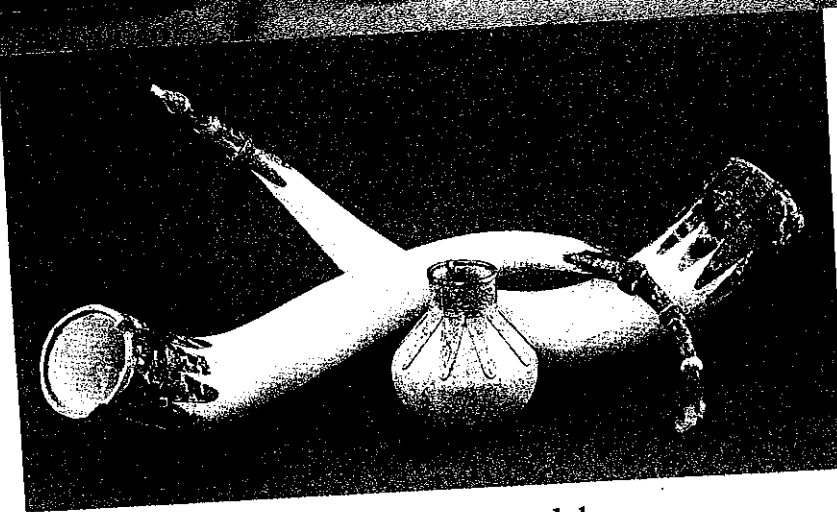
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Welthow was pleased with his words,
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

225

The feast went on, laughter and music
And the brave words of warriors celebrating
Their delight. . . .

200. gold-ringed: wearing gold bracelets.



Reconstructed drinking
horns and wooden bottle,
Sutton Hoo.
Courtesy, British Museum

The Battle with Grendel

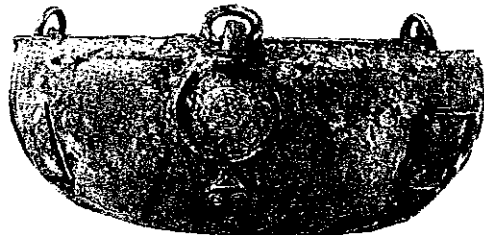
After the banquet the Danes retire for the night, but Beowulf and his followers stay on in Herot as they have requested. Beowulf renews his promise to fight without a weapon and pretends to sleep. His followers take the places of Hrothgar's men and settle down for the night.

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.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way —
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
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
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
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
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 260
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 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 265
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 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, 270
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth
 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 275
 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
 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 280
 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 Closer. The infamous killer fought
 For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot 285
 Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
 And Danes shook with terror. Down
 The aisles the battle swept, angry
 And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully 290
 Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
 Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
 And out, artfully worked, the building
 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell 295
 To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
 As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
 To stand forever; only fire,
 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put 300
 Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
 Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
 The sounds changed, the Danes started
 In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang 305

In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
 And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
 Of him who of all the men on earth
 Was the strongest.

That mighty protector of men
 Meant to hold the monster till its life
 Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
 Swords raised and ready, determined
 To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
 Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
 From every side, trying to open
 A path for his evil soul, but their points
 Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
 Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
 Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
 That blunted every mortal man's blade.
 And yet his time had come, his days
 Were over, his death near; down
 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
 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
 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
 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
 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,
 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



A Celtic hanging bowl,
 Sutton Hoo.
 Courtesy, British Museum

320

325

330

335

340

345

350

Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
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.

355

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
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,
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.
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
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.

360

365

370

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hardhooved
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
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
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

375

380

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
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
Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
While he shaped it. . . .

385

390

389-390. **Would weave . . . verses:** The poet compares the composing of a song to the weaving of a tapestry.

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you think Grendel represents? With what aspects of nature is he associated? How does Grendel's world contrast with that of Herot?
2. Besides being exciting, how is the battle with Grendel a representation of good against evil? What is the significance of Beowulf's meeting Grendel alone and unarmed?
3. The warriors who follow Grendel's footprints to the lake have no sense of sorrow, feel no regret for Grendel's suffering. How did you respond to him after he was wounded? How do you think the poet wanted you to respond? Point out specific lines that support your answer.
4. In what ways does *Beowulf* illustrate the following Anglo-Saxon ideals of conduct: (a) allegiance to lord and king; (b) love of glory as the ruling motive of every noble life; and (c) belief in the inevitability of fate?

CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

Anglo-Saxon poetry had a strong oral tradition behind it. The poems were memorized rather than written and were recited by *scops*, wandering poets who chanted their poems in the mead halls of kings and nobles.

Anglo-Saxon poetry does not rhyme, but the poems have very strong rhythms, suitable for chanting. The rhythm of a line depends primarily on the number of *beats*, or accented syllables. Each line has four beats. The number of unaccented syllables in a line may vary. Some lines may be long and others short. Each line has a strong pause, or *caesura* (sī-zhōōr'ə), after the second beat. Each line is divided into two parts, each with two beats.

Alliteration is used to bind together the two halves of a line. One or more accented syllables in the first half of a line almost always alliterate with one or more accented syllables in the second half.

If the jingle about Old King Cole were put into Anglo-Saxon verse form, it might sound like this:

Cole was the King; he was keen and merry;
Mirthful he was, with minstrels in mead-hall.
He called for his cup; he called for his pipe.
His fiddlers were three, and fine was their
trilling.

Another characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry is the use of *kennings*. A kenning is a metaphorical phrase or compound word used instead of the name of a person or thing. For example, Grendel is called the "shepherd of evil" (line 270). Kennings are closely related to riddles. What might the following kennings refer to: "the whale-road"; "the sea-paths"; "God's bright beacon"; and "Heaven's high arch"?

FOR COMPOSITION

1. Epic heroes usually exemplify the character traits most admired by their societies. What qualities are most admired by Beowulf's society? Write a short essay on the ideal king and warrior, citing evidence from the poem.
2. Every generation has had its heroes who reflect the general character of their society. Discuss the similarities and differences in the concept of the hero in Anglo-Saxon times and today. What do these differences reveal about the change in morals and values? What do they reveal about continuity in our morals and values?

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