

English 201
Major British Authors
Mr. Harris

***Beowulf* lines 4-52.**
Issues for consideration

1. The poem begins with the line “in geardagum” (“in days of yore”), the Old English version of “once upon a time.” What are the generic consequences of this beginning? How does it affect the way we see historical time in this poem?
2. The poem begins with a funeral on water. It ends with a funeral in fire. The elements play a significant but enigmatic role in the construction of this poem. Any ideas?
3. Scyld Scefing is the ideal king: “Ðæt wæs god cyning!” (11b). What are the characteristics which the poet idealizes?
4. Note that Beow of line 18 is not Beowulf, but an eponymous ancestor.
5. Lines 20-25 represent a shift of voice into the gnomic—that is, the voice that offers wisdom. The poet has a number of voices: he or she tells stories, retreats into memory, laments, reports, and offers wisdom, among other things.
6. Line 43a (“Nalæs hi hine læssan . . .”) is an example of **litotes**, a rhetorical trope which is best described as an understatement. It signals a kind of reserve, which is typical of the poet’s approach to his or her material.
7. Scyld is a foundling. He was set out on the waves (like Moses?) without companions, a wanderer or seafarer. He is without genealogy, unlike each of the characters in this poem for whom family is the singular marker of identity. Scyld’s fame lies not in his relations, but in his deeds. How does Beowulf compare?
8. Genealogical beginnings are not unknown in Western literary tradition. Compare the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, for example. Why begin a story with a family history? What does it evoke? How does it set the stage?
9. Scyld’s men place a banner over his head. This is not the first banner that will appear. Pay close attention: the objects we see in the first half will have their parallels in the second half. Note also swords and their ancestry. Everything in this poem has a story attached to it.