



Winter 1-13-1999

Oldest Surviving Epic in British Literature Heroic Poem, Beowulf, Slated for Unique One-Man Show at Illinois Wesleyan, Jan. 20

Bob Aaron
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

Recommended Citation

Aaron, Bob, "Oldest Surviving Epic in British Literature Heroic Poem, Beowulf, Slated for Unique One-Man Show at Illinois Wesleyan, Jan. 20" (1999). *News and Events*. 716.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/716>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Jan. 13, 1999

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

Oldest Surviving Epic in British Literature

**Heroic Poem, Beowulf, Slated for Unique One-Man Show at Illinois Wesleyan,
Jan. 20**

" . . . When he has finished, you leave with the overwhelming impression that you know the anonymous poet who created Beowulf more than a dozen centuries ago, that you have felt the man's personality touch you . . . Mr. Bagby comes as close to holding hundreds of people in a spell as ever a man has."

--New York Times

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--It was written centuries ago, but a trendy critic for Entertainment Weekly says it's a prototype for an Arnold Schwarzenegger action flick or grist for an episode of TV's fantasy series, Xena: Warrior Princess.

What critic Ken Tucker was writing about in the New York Times is a unique one-man show that brings to life, Beowulf, the epic Anglo-Saxon poem about the adventures of a great sixth-century Scandinavian warrior.

Benjamin Bagby will bring his widely acclaimed rendition of Beowulf--the oldest surviving epic in British literature--to Illinois Wesleyan University Jan. 20 for one performance at 7:30 p.m. in Evelyn Chapel, 1301 N. Park St., Bloomington. Admission is free and the performance is open to the public. Bagby's appearance is sponsored by IWU's Student Senate, President's Office, English Department, Sigma Tau Delta, Mellon Center, Humanities Department, and Co-Curricular Programs.

Bagby will recite and sing the first 852 lines of the poem (about one-quarter of the epic), accompanying himself on the lyre, in a 90-minute presentation. The six-string musical instrument was built in Wiesbaden, Germany, and is based on remains excavated from a seventh-century nobleman's grave, located south of Stuttgart.

Rave Reviews Cited in New York Times

Commenting on the Beowulf production in the New York Times, Tucker wrote of Bagby's performance that "he has received rave reviews here and in Europe for the way he embodies a flesh-and-blood version of the ancient scop--the popularizing storyteller."

Tucker added: "Beowulf is not merely relevant to late-90s audiences, it's practically a ready-made shooting script for a 1998 cineplex event . . ."

Beowulf's roots rest in the art of the scop, the bardic storyteller and reciter at formal and informal gatherings popular in the tribal society of early medieval England. The scop would retell the Beowulf tale in song and speech oftentimes accompanying himself on the lyre.

According to one account, "The 'performance'--which, for the whole epic, might last between four and seven hours--would never be exactly the same twice, as the 'singer of the tales' subtly varied the use of poetic formulae to shape his unique version of the story."

Bagby performs Beowulf in the original Anglo-Saxon dialect. A complete, line-by-line translation will be given the audience.

Critical Acclaim

Bagby's Beowulf performance has won critical acclaim in the United States and overseas. The Washington Post called the production " . . . a vivid demonstration of what has been lost in the process of becoming modern . . . Bagby, using a brilliant array of dramatic and rhetorical techniques, made it a dazzling experience. His performances should be recorded and made required listening. . . "

The Milwaukee Sentinel characterized Bagby's interpretation of Beowulf as " . . . chillingly graphic . . .," while the Seattle Post-Intelligencer wrote: ". . . performing in a language not one in the audience could understand, Bagby held the audience spellbound."

The Times of London wrote: "What was incontrovertible about Bagby's performance was its ring of truth . . . Old English has rarely seemed so alive. . . "

The Jerusalem Post called Bagby's Beowulf, "So vivid, so explicit in its dramatic gesture and power of representation, that the whole story could be easily understood."

Reviewer Anthony Tommasini observed: "For many an undergraduate English major, Beowulf is a chore, one of those monuments to hurdle on the way to a degree. But for Bagby, Beowulf is a vibrant, breathing, essential work," adding, "Solid scholarship backs up Bagby's performance."

Poem Described

In the heroic poem, Beowulf is tapped by Hrothgar, King of the Danes, to defeat the terrible Grendel, a monster who had been terrorizing Denmark for years in the Dark Ages. At one point, Grendel appears from the misty marshes, exuding evil, and eats a sleeping warrior. Beowulf has promised to use no weapons in the looming fight since Grendel is unarmed. In fact, Grendel has placed a spell on the Danes' weapons so they are useless.

One characterization of the fateful encounter describes it this way: "Next, the monster reaches for Beowulf, but the hero grasps his arm and rises to his feet. In the ferocious struggle that follows, the hero wrenches off Grendel's arm.

"The sounds of the combat terrify the Danes outside: Grendel howling with pain, benches torn up and overturned, the hall shaken to its foundations. Grendel, leaving a trail of blood, escapes without his arm and limps back to the fens where he dies. Beowulf fixes the arm high above the hall as a symbol of victory. Heorot [the great hall] is cleansed of the evil monster, and in the morning people come from far and near to inspect the site, following Grendel's trail to a boiling pool of bloody dark water in the marshes . . . "

Beowulf Excerpt

Here's a sample of the poem in translation dealing with Grendel's demise:

"Then, so I've heard, there were many warriors
round the gift-hall that fine morning:
chieftains came from near and far,
long distances, to look at the marvel,
the monster's tracks. His parting from life
was no cause for grief to any of the men
who examined the trail of the conquered one,
saw how, despairing, he had rushed away,

ruined in the fight, to the lake of monsters,
fleeing, doomed, in bloody footprints.
There the lake water boiled with blood,
terrible surgings, a murky swirl
of hot dark ooze, deep sword-blood;
death-fated, he hid joyless in the fen,
his dark stronghold, till he gave up life,
his heathen soul; there Hell received him."

The original Beowulf manuscript is housed in London's British Museum. This copy survived the wholesale destruction of religious artifacts during the dissolution of the monasteries by English King Henry VIII and a fire which destroyed the library of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631). The manuscript was scarred by the fire.

Bagby Background

Bagby's family, who has Danish and English origins, settled in the colony of Virginia in the 1600s. Bagby, born on the shore of Lake Michigan, was captivated by Beowulf as a youngster. In 1974, he earned degrees in voice and German at Oberlin Conservatory and Oberlin College in Ohio and received a Watson Foundation Fellowship to study the performance of medieval song. Subsequently, in Basel, Switzerland, he began a long-term collaboration with Barbara Thornton, resulting in the founding of Sequentia, an ensemble for medieval music based in Cologne, Germany.

Sequentia was established in 1977 and, according to Aaron Concert Management, Inc., "has grown to become the internationally acclaimed leader in its field--an ensemble that combines vocal and instrumental virtuosity with innovative research and programming to reconstruct the living musical traditions of medieval Europe."

The Boston Globe observed: "considerable achievement is to present this music with imaginative truth . . . Benjamin Bagby has a lovely light baritone and a way with words."

The New Yorker magazine said, "Sequentia brings the discoveries of scholarship to life. Each carefully planned and balanced program is a modern adventure through the rich past."

Sequentia has toured internationally and made a dozen recordings, as well as films for television and independent filmmakers.

The ensemble has received prestigious research grants from the Volkswagen Foundation and the Siemens Foundation of Germany. It has been in residence at research centers and universities in North America and Europe. Among its awards and honors are the Netherlands' coveted Edison Award and the Innsbruck Radio Prize for Early Music.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.

| Top of Page |
