

Beowulf

Translation by Seamus Heaney

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
As his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
Beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
And begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

10

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,
A cub in the yard, a comfort sent
By God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,
The long times and troubles they'd come through
Without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
The glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that,
Giving freely while his father lives
So that afterwards in age when fighting starts
Steadfast companions will stand beside him
And hold the line. Behavior that's admired
Is the path to power among people everywhere.

20

Shield was still thriving when his time came
And he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them

When he laid down the law among the Danes:
They shouldered him out to the sea's flood, 30
The chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
Laid out by the mast, amidships,
The great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
Were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
With battle tackle, bladed weapons
And coats of mail. The massed treasure 40
Was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
On out into the ocean's sway.
They decked his body no less bountifully
With offerings than those first ones did
Who cast him away when he was a child
And launched him alone out over the waves.
And they set a gold standard up
High above his head and let him drift
To wind and tide, bewailing him
And mourning their loss. No man can tell, 50
No wise man in hall or weathered veteran
Knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.
He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
For a long time after his father took leave
Of his life on earth. And then his heir,
The great Halfdane, held sway
For as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
He was four times a father, this fighter prince:
One by one they entered the world, 60
Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga
And a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,

A balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
Young followers, a force that grew
To be a mighty army. So his mind turned
To hall-building: he handed down orders
For men to work on a great mead-hall
Meant to be a wonder of the world forever; 70
It would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
His God-given goods to young and old---
But not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
Orders for work to adorn that wall stead
Were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
Finished and ready, in full view,
The hall of halls. Heorot was the name
He had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings 80
And torques at the table. The hall towered,
Its gables wide and high and awaiting
A barbarous burning. That doom abided,
But in time it would come: the killer instinct
Unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.
Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
Nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
To hear the din of the loud banquet
Every day in the hall, the harp being struck
And the clear song of a skilled poet 90
Telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
How the Almighty had made the earth
A gleaming plain girdled with waters;
In His splendour He set the sun and moon
To be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
And filled the broad lap of the world

With branches and leaves; and quickened life
In every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there
Until finally one, a fiend out of Hell, 100
Began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
In misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
Because the Almighty made him anathema 110
And out of the curse of his exile there sprang
Ogres and elves and evil phantoms
And the giants too who strove with God
Time and again until He gave them their final reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
For the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
Were settling into it after their drink,
And there he came upon them, a company of the best
Asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
And human sorrow. Suddenly then 120
The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
From their resting places and rushed to his lair,
Flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
Blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
Their wassail was over, they wept to heaven

And mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
The storied leader, sat stricken and helpless, 130
Humiliated by the loss of his guard,
Bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
And the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
For one night later the merciless Grendel
Struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
Shifting himself to a safer distance
To bed in the bothies, for who could be blind 140
To the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
Of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
Kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
One against all, until the greatest house
In the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
The lord of the Shieldings suffered under
His load of sorrow; and so, before long,
The news was known over the whole world. 150
Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
The vicious raids of Grendel,
His long and unrelenting feud,
Nothing but war; how he would never
Parley or make peace with any Dane
Nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
No counsellor could ever expect
Fair reparation from those rabid hands.
All were endangered; young and old
Were hunted down by that dark death-shadow 160
Who lurked and swooped in the long nights
On the misty moors; nobody knows

Where these reavers from Hell roam on their errands.

So Grendel waged his lonely war,
Inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
Atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
Haunted the glittering hall after dark,
But the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
He was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

These were hard times, heart-breaking 170
For the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,
The highest in the land, would lend advice,
Plotting how best the bold defenders
Might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
Offering to idols, swore oaths
That the killer of souls might come to their aid
And save the people. That was their way,
Their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
They remembered Hell. The Almighty Judge 180
Of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
Was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
Who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul
In the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
He has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
Who after death can approach the Lord
And find friendship in the Father's embrace.

So that troubled time continued, woe
That never stopped, steady affliction 190
For Haldane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
Raids in the night, riven by terror.

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
Was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
High-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
That would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
To sail the swan's roads and search out that king, 200
The famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
No elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
His ambition to go, whilst he moved about
Like the leader he was, enlisting men,
The best he could find; with fourteen others
The warrior boarded the boat as captain,
A canny pilot along coast and currents.

Time went by, the boat was on water, 210
In close under the cliffs.
Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
Sand churned in surf, shining war-gear
In the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
Away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
Over the waves, with the wind behind her
And foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
Until her curved prow had covered the distance
And on the following day, at the due hour, 220
Those seafarers sighted land,
Sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
And looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
Over the side, out on to the sand,
And moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
And a thresh of gear. They thanked God
For that easy crossing on a calm sea.

When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
Whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs, 230
Saw shields glittering on the gangplank
And battle-equipment being unloaded
He had to find out who and what
The arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
This horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
In formal terms, flourishing his spear:

“What kind of men are you who arrive
Rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
Sailing here over the sea lanes
In your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed 240
As lookout on this coast for a long time.
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
And danger to the Danish shore.
Never before has a force under arms
Disembarked so openly---not bothering to ask
If the sentries allowed them safe passage
Or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
A mightier man-at-arms on this earth
Than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
He is truly noble. This is no mere 250
Hanger-on in a hero's armour.
So now, before you fare inland
As interlopers, I have to be informed
About who you are and where you hail from.
Outsiders from across the water,
I say it again: the sooner you tell
Where you came from and why, the better.”

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
The distinguished one delivered this answer:
“We belong by birth to the Geat people 260
And owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.

In her fresh tar, until the time comes
For her curved prow to preen on the waves
And bear this hero back to Geatland.
May one so valiant and venturesome
Come unharmed through the clash of battle.” 300

So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,
Broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
And anchored fast. Boar-shapes flashed
Above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
Work of goldsmiths, watching over
Those stern-faced men. They marched in step,
Hurrying on till the timbered hall
Rose before them, radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
Building like it. Majesty lodged there, 310
And its light shone over many lands.
So their gallant escort guided them
To that dazzling stronghold and indicated
The shortest way to it; then the noble warrior
Wheeled on his horse and spoke these words:
“It is time for me to go. May the Almighty
Father keep you and in His kindness
Watch over your exploits. I’m away to the sea,
Back on alert against enemy raiders.”

It was a paved track, a path that kept them 320
In marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,
Hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron
Of their armour rang. So they duly arrived
In their grim war-graith and gear at the hall,
And, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields
Of the toughest hardwood against the wall,
Then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress
And weapons clashed. They collected their spears

In a seafarer's stook, a stand of grayish
Tapering ash. And the troops themselves 330
Were as good as their weapons.

Then a proud warrior
Questioned the men concerning their origins:
"Where do you come from, carrying these
Decorated shields and shirts of mail,
These cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?
I am Hrothgar's herald and officer.
I have never seen so impressive or large
An assembly of strangers. Stoutness of heart,
Bravery not banishment, must have brought you to Hrothgar."

The man whose name was known for courage, 340
The Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,
Answered in return: "We are retainers
From Hygelac's band. Beowulf is my name.
If your lord and master, the most renowned
Son of Halfdane, will hear me out
And graciously allow me to greet him in person,
I am ready and willing to report my errand."

Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief
Renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom
And the temper of his mind: "I will take this message, 350
In accordance with your wish, to our noble king,
Our dear lord, friend of the Danes,
The giver of rings. I will go and ask him
About your coming here, then hurry back
With whatever reply it pleases him to give."

With that he turned to where Hrothgar sat,
An old man among retainers;
The valiant follower stood four-square
In front of his king: he knew the courtesies.

Wulfgar addressed his dear lord: 360
“People from Geatland have put ashore.
They have sailed far over the wide sea.
They call the chief in charge of their band
By the name of Beowulf. They beg, my lord,
An audience with you, exchange of words
And formal greeting. Most gracious Hrothgar,
Do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.
From their arms and appointment, they appear well-born
And worthy of respect, especially the one
Who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed.” 370

Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:
“I used to know him when I was a young boy.
His father before him was called Ecgtheow.
Hrethel the Greath gave Ecgtheow
His daughter in marriage. This man is their son,
Here to follow up an old friendship.
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
With a gift-cargo across to Geatland
Returned with marvelous tales about him: 380
Athane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
In the grip of each hand. Now Holy God
Has, in His Goodness, guided him here
To the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure.
Go immediately, bid him and the Geats
He has is attendance to assemble and enter.
Say, moreover, when you speak to them,
That they are welcome in Denmark.”

At the door of the hall,
Wulfgar duly delivered the message: 390
“My lord, the conquering king of the Danes,

Bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;
Also that he welcomes you here to Heorot
And salutes your arrival from across the sea.
You are free now to move forward
To meet Hrothgar, in helmets and armor,
But shields must stay here and spears be stacked
Until the outcome of the audience is clear.”

The hero arose, surrounded closely
By his powerful thanes. A party remained
Under orders to keep watch on the arms;
The rest proceeded, lead by their prince
Under Heorot’s roof. And standing on the hearth
In webbed links that the smith had woven,
The fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail shirt,
Resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:

400

“Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac’s kinsman,
One of his hall-troop. When I was younger,
I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,
Hard to ignore, reached me at home:

410

Sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer
In this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,
Empty and useless once the evening light
Hides itself under Heaven’s dome.

So every elder and experience councilman
Among my people supported my resolve
To come here to you, King Hrothgar,
Because all knew of my awesome strength.

They had seen me boltered in the blood of enemies
When I battled and bound five beasts,

420

Raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea
Slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes
And avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it
Upon themselves, I devastated them).

Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
Settle the outcome in a single combat.

And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
Dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people
And their ring of defense, my one request
Is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far, 430
The privilege of purifying Heorot,
With my own men to help me, and nobody else.
I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
In his reckless way to use weapons;
Therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame
And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
Is how it will be, a life-and-death
Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells 440
Must deem it a just judgment by God.
If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;
He will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,
Swoop without fear on that flower of manhood
As on others before. Then my face won't be there
To be covered in death; he will carry me away
As he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;
He will run gloating with my raw corpse
And feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,
Fouling his moor-nest. No need then 450
To lament for long or lay out my body:
If the battle takes me, send back
This breast-webbing that Weland fashioned
And Hrethel gave me, to Hygelac.
Fate goes ever as fate must."

Hrothgar, the helmet of the Shieldings, spoke:
"Beowulf, my friend, you have traveled here
To favour us with help and fight for us.
There was a feud one time, begun by your father.
With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf, 460

Who was a Wulfing; so war was looming
And his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.
He came away then over rolling waves
To the South Danes here, the sons of honor.
I was then in the full flush of kingship,
Establishing my sway over all the rich strongholds
Of this heroic land. Heorogar,
My older brother and the better man,
Also a son of Halfdane's, had died.
Finally I healed the feud by paying: 470
I shipped a treasure-trove to the Wulfings
And Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance.

“It bothers me to have to burden anyone
With all the grief Grendel has caused
And the havoc he has wreaked upon us in Heorot,
Our humiliations. My household-guard
Are on the wane, fate sweeps them away
Into Grendel's clutches---but God can easily
Halt these raids and harrowing attacks!

“Time and again, when the goblets passed 480
And seasoned fighters got flushed with beer
They would pledge themselves to protect Heorot
And wait for Grendel with whetted swords.
But when dawn broke and day crept in
Over each empty, blood-spattered bench,
The floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted
Would be slick with slaughter. And so they died,
Faithful retainers, and my following dwindled.
Now take your place at the table, relish
The triumph of heroes to your heart's content.” 490

Then a bench was cleared in that banquet hall
So the Geats could have room to be together

And the party sat, proud in their bearing,
Strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by
With a decorated pitcher, pouring bright
Helpings of mead. And the minstrel sang,
Filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice,
Gladdening that great rally of Danes and Geats.

From where he crouched at the king's feet,
Unferth, a son of Ecglaf's, spoke 500
Contrary words. Beowulf's coming,
His sea-braving, made him sick with envy:
He could not brook or abide the fact
That anyone else alive under heaven
Might enjoy greater regard than he did:

“Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
In a swimming match on the open sea,
Risking the water just to prove you could win?
It was sheer vanity made you venture out
On the main deep. And no matter who tried, 510
Friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,
Neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed you.
You waded in, embracing water,
Taking its measure, mastering currents,
Riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,
Winter went wild in the waves, but you vied
For seven nights; and then he outswam you,
Came ashore the stronger contender.

He was cast up safe and sound one morning
Among the Heathoreams, then made his way 520
To where he belonged in Bronding country,
Home again, sure of his ground
In strong room and bawn. So Breca made good
His boast upon you and was proved right.
No matter, therefore, how you may have fared
In every bout and battle until now,

This time you'll be worsted; no one has ever
Outlasted an entire night against Grendel."

Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:

"Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say 530

About Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
That was doing the talking. The truth is this:
When the going was heavy in those high waves,
I was the strongest swimmer of all.

We'd been children together and we grew up
Daring ourselves to outdo each other,
Boasting and urging each other to risk
Our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.

Each of us swam holding a sword,
A naked, hard-proofed blade for protection 540

Against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never
Move out farther or faster from me
Than I could manage to move from him.

Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
For five nights, until the long flow
And pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
Night falling and winds from the North
Drove us apart. The deep boiled up
And its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.

My armor held me to hold out; 550

My hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,
A fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,

Kept me safe when some ocean creature
Pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
And swathed in its grip, I was granted one
Final chance: my sword plunged

And the ordeal was over. Through my own hands
The fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

"Time and again, foul things attacked me,

Lurking and stalking, but I lashed out, 560
Gave as good as I got with my sword.
My flesh was not for feasting on,
There would be no monsters gnawing and gloating
Over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.
Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping
The sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated
Like the ocean's leavings. From now on
Sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids
Were over for good. Light came from the East,
Bright guarantee of God, and the waves 570

Went quiet; I could see the headlands
And buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,
Fate spares the man it has not already marked.
However it had occurred, my sword had killed
Nine sea monsters. Such night-dangers
And hard ordeals I have never heard of
Nor of a man so desolate in surging waves.
But worn out as I was, I survived,
Came through with my life. The ocean lifted
And laid me ashore, I landed safe 580
On the coast of Finland.

Now, I cannot recall
any fight you entered, Unferth,
That bears comparison. I don't boast when I say
That neither you nor Breca ever were much
Celebrated for swordsmanship
Or for facing danger in the battlefield.
You killed your own kith and kin,
So for all your cleverness and quick tongue,
You will suffer damnation in the pits of hell.
The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly 590
As keen or courageous as you claim to be
Grendel would never have got away with
Such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,

Havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.
But he knows he need never be in dread
Of your blade making a mizzle of his blood
Or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter---
From the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear.
He knows he can trample down you Danes
To his heart's content, humiliate and murder 600
Without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.
I will show him how Geats shape to kill
In the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to
May go bravely to morning mead, when morning light,
Scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
And brings another daybreak to the world.”

Then the gray-haired treasure-giver was glad;
Far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
And keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
On the warrior's steadfastness and his word. 610
So the laughter started, the din got louder
And the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
The men in the hall, then handed the cup
First to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,
Urging him to drink deep and enjoy it,
Because he was dear to them. And he drank it down
Like the warlord he was, with festive cheer.
So the Helming woman went on her rounds, 620
Queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,
Offering the goblet to all ranks,
Treating the household and the assembled troop
Until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.
With measured words she welcomed the Geat
And thanked God for granting her wish
That a deliverer she could believe in would arrive

To ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,
A daunting man, dangerous in action
And eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow; 630
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:

“I had a fixed purpose when I put out to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
What your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
In the fiend’s clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
Prove myself with a proud deed
Or meet my death here in the mead-hall.”

This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat
Pleased the lady well and she went to sit 640
By Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.

Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,
Proud talk and the people happy,
Loud and excited; until soon enough
Halfdane’s heir had to be away
To his night’s rest. He realized
That the demon was going to descend on the hall
That he had plotted all day, from dawn-light
Until darkness gathered again over the world
And stealthy night-shades came stealing forth 650
Under the cloud-murk. The company stood
As the two leaders took leave of each other:
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,
Named him hall-warden and announced as follows:
“Never, since my hand could hold a shield
Have I entrusted or given control
Of the Dane’s hall to anyone but you.
Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.
Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,

Beware of the enemy. There's nothing you wish for
That won't be yours if you win through alive."

660

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.
The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,
Left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,
His queen and bedmate. The King of Glory
(as people learned) had posted a lookout
Who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,
Special protection to the Danish prince.

And the Geat placed complete trust

In his strength of limb and the Lord's favor.

670

He began to remove his iron breast-mail,
Took off the helmet and handed his attendant
The patterned sword, a smith's masterpiece,
Ordering him to keep the equipment guarded.

And before he bedded down, Beowulf,

That prince of goodness, proudly asserted:

"When it comes to fighting, I count myself
As dangerous any day as Grendel.

So it won't be a cutting edge I'll wield

To mow him down, easily as I might.

680

He has no ideas of the arts of war,

Of shield or sword-play, though he does possess

A wild strength. No weapons, therefore,

For either this night: unarmed he shall face me

If face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord

In His wisdom grant victory

To whichever side He sees fit."

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster

Under his head and his whole company

Of sea-rovers at rest beside him.

690

None of them expected he would ever see

His homeland again or get back

To his native place and the people who reared him.
They knew too well the way it was before,
How often the Danes had fallen prey
To death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving
A victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.
Through the strength of one they all prevailed;
They would crush their enemy and come through
In triumph and gladness. The truth is clear: 700
Almighty God rules over mankind
And always has.

Then out of the night
Came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;
The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,
All except one; it was widely understood
That as long as God disallowed it,
The fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.
One man, however, was in a fighting mood,
Awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

In off the moors, down through the mist-bands 710
God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
Hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it
Until it shone above him, a sheer keep
Of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
He had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling---
Although never in his life, before or since,
Did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead 720
And arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door
Turned in its hinge when his hand touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
The mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
Pacing the length of the patterned floor

With his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,
Flame more than light, flared from his eyes.
He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,
A ranked company of kinsmen and warriors
Quartered together. And his glee was demonic, 730
Picturing the mayhem: before morning
He would rip life from limp and devour them,
Feed on their flesh: but his fate that night
Was due to change, his days of ravening
Had come to an end.

Mighty and canny,
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
For the first move the monster would make.
Nor did the creature keep him waiting
But struck suddenly and started in;
He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench, 740
Bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
And gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
Utterly lifeless, eaten up
Hand and foot. Venturing closer,
his talon was raised to attack Beowulf
Where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in
With open claw when the alert hero's
Comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.
The captain of evil discovered himself
In a handgrip harder than anything 750
He had ever encountered in any man
On the face of the earth. Every bone in his body
Quailed and coiled, but he could not escape.
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide
With the devil's litter, for in all his days
He had never been clamped or cornered like this.
Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled
His bedtime speech, sprang to his feet
And got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,

The monster back-tracking, the man overpowering. 760

The dread of the land was desperate to escape,
To take a roundabout road and flee
To his lair in the fens. The latching power
In his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip
The terror-monger had taken to Heorot.
And now the timber trembled and sang,
A hall-session that harrowed every Dane
Inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,
The two contenders crashed through the building.

The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow 770

Survived the onslaught and kept standing:
It was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame
Braced with the best of blacksmith's work
Inside and out. The story goes
That as the pair struggled, mead benches were smashed
And sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.
Before then, no Shielding elder would believe
There was any power or person on earth
Capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall
Unless the burning embrace of fire 780

Engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary
Wail arose, and bewildering fear
Came over the Danes. Everyone felt it
Who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,
A God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,
The howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
Keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,
Manacled tight by the man who of all men
Was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

But the earl troop's leader was not inclined 790

To allow his caller to depart alive:
He did not consider that life of much account
To anyone anywhere. Time and again,

Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
Their lord's life, laying about them
As best they could with their ancestral blades.
Stalwart in action, they kept striking out
On every side, seeking to cut
Straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle
There was something they could have not known at the time, 800
That not blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
Could ever damage their demon opponent.
He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge
Of every weapon. But his going away
Out of the world and the days of his life
Would be agony to him, and his alien spirit
would travel far into fiends' keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men
With pain and affliction in former times
And had given offense also to God 810
Found that his bodily powers had failed him.
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly
Locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived
He was hateful to the other. The monster's whole
Body was in pain, a tremendous wound
Appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
And the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
The glory of winning; Grendel was driven
Under the fen banks, fatally hurt,
To his desolate lair. His days were numbered, 820
The end of his life was coming over him,
He knew it for certain; and one bloody clash
Had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.
The man who had lately landed among them,
Proud and sure, had purged the hall,
Kept it from harm; he was happy with his night-work
And the courage he had shown. The Geat captain

Had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:
He had healed and relieved a huge distress,
Unremitting humiliations, 830
The hard fate they'd been forced to undergo,
No small affliction. Clear proof of this
Could be seen in the hand the hero displayed
High up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's
Shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior
Gathered, as I have heard, around the gift-hall,
Clan-chiefs flocking from far and near
Down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly 840
At the monster's footprint. His fatal departure
Was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,
The ignominious marks of his flight
Where he'd sulked away, exhausted in spirit
And beaten in battle, bloodying the path,
Hauling his doom to the demons' mere.
The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,
There were loathsome up throws and over turnings
Of waves and gore and would-slurry.
With his death upon him, he had dived deep
Into his marsh den, drowned out his life 850
And his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

Then away they rode, the old retainers
With many a young man following after,
A troop on horseback, in high spirits
On their bay steeds. Beowulf's doings
Were praised over and over again.
Nowhere, they said, north or south
Between the two seas or under the tall sky
On the broad earth was there anyone better
To raise a shield or to rule a kingdom. 860

Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,
The noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.

At times the war-band broke into a gallop,
Letting their chestnut horses race
Wherever they found the going good
On those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane
Of the king's household, a carrier of tales,
A traditional singer deeply schooled
In the lore of the past, linked a new theme
To a strict metre. The man started 870
To recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's
Triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,
Entwining his words.

He told what he'd heard
Repeated in songs of Sigemund's exploits,
All of those many feats and marvels,
The struggles and wanderings of Wael's son,
Things unknown to anyone,
Except Fitela, feuds and foul doings
Confided from uncle to nephew when he felt
The urge to speak of them: always had they been 880
Partners in the fight, friends in need.
They killed giants, their conquering swords
Had brought them down.

After his death
Sigemund's glory grew and grew
Because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
The guardian of the hoard. Under gray stone
He had dared to enter all by himself
To face the worst without Fitela.
But nit came to pass that his sword plunged
Right through those radiant scales 890
And drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.

*His daring had given him total possession
Of the treasure hoard, his to dispose of
However he liked. He loaded a boat:
Wael's son weighted her hold
With dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted.*

*Sigemund's name was known everywhere.
He was utterly valiant and venturesome,
A fence round his fighters and flourished therefore
After King Heremond's prowess declined 900
And his campaigns slowed down. The king was betrayed,
Ambushed in Jutland, overpowered
And done away with. The waves of his grief
Had beaten him down, made him a burden,
A source of anxiety to his own nobles:
That expedition was often condemned
To those earlier times by experienced men,
Men who relied on his lordship for redress,
Who presumed that the part of a prince was to thrive
On his father's throne and protect the nation, 910
The Shielding land where they lived and belonged,
Its holdings and strongholds. Such was Beowulf
In the affection of his friends and of everyone alive.
But evil entered into Heremod.*

Meanwhile, the Dane kept racing their mounts
Down sandy lanes. The light of day
Broke and kept brightening. Bands of retainers
Galloped in excitement to the gabled hall
To see the marvel; and the king himself,
Guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person, 920
Walked in majesty from the women's quarters
With a numerous train, attended by his queen
And her crowd of maidens, across the mead-hall.

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,
Standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,
Gazing at the roofwork and Grendel's talon:
"First and foremost, let the Almighty Father
Be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long
Harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd
Can work his wonders always and everywhere. 930

Not long since, it seemed I would never
Be granted the slightest solace or relief
From any of my burdens: the best of houses
Glittered and reeked and ran with blood.
This one worry outweighed all others---
A constant distress to counselors entrusted
With defending the people's forts from assault
By monsters and demons. But now a man,
With the Lord's assistance, has accomplished something
None of us could manage before now 940

For all our efforts. Whoever she was
Who brought forth this flower of manhood,
If she is still alive, that woman can say
That in her labor the Lord of Ages
Bestowed a grace on her. So now, Beowulf,
adopt you in my heart as a dear son.
Nourish and maintain this new connection,
You noblest of men; there'll be nothing you want for,
No worldly good that won't be yours.
I have often honored smaller achievements, 950
Recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,
Lavished rewards on the less deserving.
But you have made yourself immortal
By your glorious action. May the Lord of Ages
Continue to keep and requite you well."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"We have gone through a glorious endeavor

And been much favored in this fight we dared
Against the unknown. Nevertheless,
If you could have seen the monster himself 960
Where he lay beaten, I would have been better pleased.
My plan was to pounce, pin him down
In a tight grip and grapple him to death---
Have him panting for life, powerless and clasped
In my bare hands, his body in thrall.
But I couldn't stop him from slipping my hold.
The Lord allowed it, my lock on him
Wasn't strong enough, he struggled fiercely
And broke and ran. Yet he bought his freedom
At a high price, for he left his hand 970
And arm and shoulder to show he had been here,
A cold comfort for having come among us.
And now he won't be long for this world.
He has done his worst but the wound will end him.
He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain,
Limped and looped in it. Like a man outlawed
For wickedness, he mush await
The mighty judgment of God in majesty.”

There was less tampering and big talk then
From Unferth the boaster, less of his blather 980
As the hall-thanes eyed the awful proof
Of the hero's prowess, the splayed hand
Up under the eaves. Every nail,
Claw-scale and spur, every spike
And welt on the hand of that heathen brute
Was like barbed steel. Everybody said
There was no honed iron hard enough
To pierce him through, no time-proofed blade
That could cut his brutal, blood-caked claw.

Then the order was given for all hands 990

To help refurbish Heorot immediately:
Men and women thronging the wine-hall,
Getting it ready. Gold thread shone
In the wall-hangings, woven scenes
That attracted and held the eye's attention.
But iron-braced as the inside of it had been,
The bright room lay in ruins now.
The very doors had been dragged from their hinges.
Only the roof remained unscathed
By the time the guilt-fouled fiend turned tail 1000
In despair of his life. But death is not easily
Escaped from by anyone:
All of us with souls, earth-dwellers
And children of men, must make our way
To a destination already ordained
Where the body, after the banqueting,
Sleeps on its deathbed.

Then the due time arrived
For Halfdane's son to proceed to the hall.
The king himself would sit down to feast.
No group ever gathered in greater numbers 1010
Or better order around their ring-giver.
The benches filled with famous men
Who fell to with relish; round upon round
Of mead was passed; those powerful kinsmen,
Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits
In the raftered hall. Inside Heorot
There was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation
Was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.
Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
With gold standards as a victory gift, 1020
An embroidered banner; also breast-mail
And a helmet; and a sword carried high,
That was both precious object and a token of honor.
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;

It was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts
In front of the hall-troops. There haven't been many
Moments, I am sure, when men have exchanged
Four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.
An embossed ring, a band lapped with wire
Arched over the helmet: head-protection 1030
To keep the keen-ground cutting edge
From damaging it when danger threatened
And the man was battling behind his shield.
Next the king ordered eight horses
With gold bridles to be brought through the yard
Into the hall. The harness of one
Included a saddle of sumptuous design,
The battle-seat where the son of Halfdane
Rode when he wished to join the sword-play:
Wherever the killing and carnage were the worst, 1040
He would be to the fore, fighting hard.
The Danish prince, descendent of Ing,
Handed over both the arms and the horses,
Urging Beowulf to use them well.
And so their leader, the lord and guard
Of coffer and strong room, with customary grace
Bestowed upon Beowulf both sets of gifts.
A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.

The chieftain went on to reward the others:
Each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf 1050
And risked the voyage received a bounty,
Some treasured possession. And compensation,
A price in gold, was settled for the Geat
Grendel had killed cruelly earlier--
As he would have killed more, had not mindful God
And one man's daring prevented that doom.
Past and present, God's will prevails.
Hence, understanding is always best

And a prudent mind. Whoever remains
For long here in this earthly life
Will enjoy and endure more than enough.

1060

They sang then and played to please the hero,
Words and music for their warrior prince,
Harp tunes and tales of adventure:
There were high times on the hall benches
And the king's poet performed his part
With the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding
The tale of the fierce attack in Friesland
Where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death.

Hildeburh 1070

*Had little cause
To credit the Jutes:
Son and brother,
She lost them both
On the battlefield.
She, bereft
And blameless, they
Foredoomed, cut down
And spear-gored. She,
The woman in shock,
Waylaid by grief,
Hoc's daughter--
How could she not
Lament her fate
When morning came
And the light broke
On her murdered dears?
And so farewell
Delight on earth,
War carried away
Finn's troop of thanes,*

1080

*All but a few.
How then could Finn
Hold the line
Or fight on
To the end with Hengest,
How save
The rump of his force
From that enemy chief?
So a truce was offered
As follows: first
Separate quarters
To be cleared for the Danes,
Hall and throne
To be shared with the Frisians.
Then, second ;
Every day
At the dole-out of gifts*

*Finn, son of Focwald,
Should honor the Danes,
Bestow with an even
Hand to Hengest
And Hengest's men
The wrought-gold rings,
Bounty to match
The measure he gave
His own Frisians--
To keep morale
In the beer-hall high.
Both sides then
Sealed their agreement.
With oaths to Hengest
Finn swore
Openly, solemnly,
That the battle survivors*

1090

*Would be guaranteed
Honor and status.
No infringement
By word or deed,
No provocation* 1100
*Would be permitted.
Their own ring-giver
After all
Was dead and gone,
They were leaderless
In forced allegiance
To his murderer.
So if any Frisian
Stirred up bad blood
With insinuations
Or taunts about this,
The blade of the sword
Will arbitrate it.
A funeral pyre
Was then prepared,
Effulgent gold
Brought out from the hoard.
The pride and prince
Of the Shieldings lay
Awaiting the flame.* 1110
*Everywhere
There were blood-plastered
Coats of mail.
The pyre was heaped
With boar-shaped helmets
Forged in gold,
With the gashed corpses
Of well-born Danes--
Many had fallen.
Then Hildeburh*

*Raged with storms,
 Wave and shingle
Were shackled on ice
 Until another year
Appeared in the yard
 As it does to this day,
The seasons constant,
 The wonder of light
Coming over us.
 Then winter was gone,
Earth's lap grew lovely,
 Longing woke
In the cooped-up exile
 For a voyage home--
But more for vengeance, 1140
 Some way of bringing
Things to a head:
 His sword arm hankered
To greet the Jutes.
 So he did not balk
Once Hunlafing
 Placed on his lap
Dazle-the -Duel,
 The best sword of all,
Whose edges Jutes
 Knew only too well.
Thus blood was spilled,
 The gallant Finn
Slain in his home
 After Guthlaf and Oslaf
Back from their voyage
 Made old accusation:
The brutal ambush,
 The fate they had suffered,
All blamed on Finn. 1150*

*The wildness in them
Had to brim over.
The hall ran red
With blood of enemies.
Finn was cut down,
The queen brought away
And everything
The Shieldings could find
Inside Finn's walls--
The Frisian king's
Gold collars and gemstones--
Swept off to the ship.
Over sea-lanes then
Back to Daneland
The warrior troop
Bore that lady home.*

The poem was over,
The poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
Started on the benches, stewards did the rounds 1160
With wine in splendid jugs, and Wilhtheow came to sit
In her gold crown between two good men,
Uncle and nephew, each of whom
Still trusted the other; and the forthright Unferth,
Admired by all for his mind and courage
Although under a cloud for killing his brothers,
Reclined near the king.

The queen spoke:
“Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;
Raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats
Duly and gently, discourse with them, 1170
Be open-handed, happy and fond.
Relish their company, but recollect as well
All of the boons that have been bestowed upon you.
The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
And now the word is that you want to adopt

This warrior as a son. So, while you may,
Bask in your fortune, then bequeath
Kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
Before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.
He is noble and will use the young ones well. 1180
He will not let you down. Should you die before him,
He will treat our children truly and fairly.
He will honor, I am sure, our two sons,
Repay them in kind when he recollects
All the good things we gave him once,
The favor and respect he found in childhood.”

She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,
Hrethric and Hrothmond, with other nobles’ sons,
All the youth together; and that good man,
Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers. 1190

The cup was carried to him, kind words
Spoken in welcome and wealth of wrought gold
Graciously bestowed; two arm bangles,
A mail shirt and rings, and the most resplendent
Torque of gold I have ever heard tell of
Anywhere on earth or under heaven.
There was no hoard like it since Hama snatched
The Brosings’ neck-chain and bore it away
With its gems and settings to his shinning fort,
Away from Eormenric’s wiles and hatred, 1200
And thereby ensured his eternal reward.
Hygelac the Geat, grandson of Swerting,
Wore this neck-ring on his last raid;
At bay under his banner, he defended the booty,
Treasure he had won. Fate swept him away
Because of his proud need to provoke
A feud with the Frisians. He fell beneath his shield,
In the same gem-crusted , kingly gear

He had worn when he crossed the frothing wave-vat.
So the dead king fell into Frankish hands. 1210
Hey took his breast-mail, also his neck-torque,
And punier warriors plundered the slain
When the carnage ended; Geat corpses
Covered the field.

Applause filled the hall.
Then Wealhtheow pronounce in the presence of the company:
“Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,
Wear it for luck and also wear this mail
From our people’s armory: may you prosper in them!
Be acclaimed or strength, for kindly guidance
To these two boys, and your bounty will be sure. 1220
You have won renown: you are known to all men
Far and near, now and forever.
Your sway is wide and the wind’s home,
As the sea around cliffs. So, my prince,
I wish you a lifetime’s luck and blessings
To enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons
With tender care, be strong and kind.
Here each comrade is true to the other,
Loyal to lord, loving in spirit.
The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready: 1230
Having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid.”

She moved then to her place. Men were drinking wine
At that rare feast; how could they know fate,
The grim shape of things to come,
The threat looming over many thanes
As night approached and king Hrothgar prepared
To retire to his quarters? Retainers in great numbers
Were posted on guard as so often in the past.
Benches were pushed back, bedding gear and bolsters
Spread across the floor, and one man 1240

Lay down to his rest, already marked for death.
At their heads they placed their polished timber
Battle-shields; and on the bench above them,
Each man's kit was kept to hand:
A towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt
And great-shafted spear. It was their habit
Always and everywhere to be ready for action,
At home or in the camp, in whatever case
And at whatever time the need arose
To rally round their lord. They were a right people. 1250

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly
For his night's ease, as had happened to them often,
Ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall,
Committing evil until the end came,
Death after his crimes. Then it became clear,
Obvious to everyone once the fight was over,
That an avenger lurked and was still alive,
Grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,
Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
She had been forced down into fearful waters, 1260
The cold depths, after Cain had killed
His father's son, felled his own
Brother with the sword. Banished an outlaw,
Marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,
Shunning company and joy. And from Cain there sprang
Misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,
The banished and accursed, due to come to grips
With that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle.
The monster wrenched and wrestled with him
But Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength, 1270
The wondrous gifts God had showered on him:
He relied for help on the Lord of All,
On His care and favor. So he overcame the foe,
Brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed,

Outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind
Made for his death-den. But now his mother
Had sallied forth on a savage journey,
Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure 1280
A great reversal once Grendel's mother
Attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less
Only by as much as an Amazon warrior's
In less than an armored man's
When the hefted sword, its hammered edge
And gleaming blade slathered in blood,
Razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet.
Then in the hall, hard-honed swords
Were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield
Lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets 1290
Or woven mail when they woke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,
In mortal terror the moment she was found.
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers
In a tight hold, then headed for the fen.
To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved
Of the friends he trusted between the two seas.
She had done away with a great warrior,
Ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

Earlier, after the reward of the treasure, 1300
The Geat had been given another lodging.
There was an uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy,
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow
To the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,
Both parties having to pay
With the lives of friends. And the old lord,

The gray-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary
When he heard the news: his highest-placed advisor,
His dearest companion, was dead and gone.
Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber: 1310
The winner of fights, the arch-warrior,
Came first-footing in with his fellow troops
To where the king in his wisdom waited,
Still wondering whether Almighty God
Would even turn the tide of his misfortunes.
So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance
And the wooden floor-boards banged and rang
As he advance, hurrying to address
The prince of the Ingwins, asking if he'd rested
Since the urgent summons had come as a surprise. 1320

Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings' helmet, spoke:
"Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.
Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.
He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother
And a soul mate to me, a true mentor,
My right-hand man when the ranks clashed
And our boar-crests had to take a battering
In the line of action. Aechere was everything
The world admires in a wise man and a friend.
Then this roaming killer came in a fury 1330
And slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,
Glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,
I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud
Because of last night, when you killed Grendel,
Wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat
Since for too long he had terrorized us
With his depredations. He died in battle,
Paid with his life; and now this powerful
Other one arrives, this force for evil
Driven to avenge her kinsman's death. 1340

Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,
In the anguish every thane endures
At the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand
That bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

“I have heard it said by my people in hall,
Counselors who live in the upland country,
That they have seen two such creatures
Prowling the moors, huge marauders
From some other world. One of these things,
As far as anyone ever can discern, 1350
Looks like a woman; the other, warped
In the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale
Bigger than any man, an unnatural birth
Called Grendel by country people
In former days. They are fatherless creatures,
And their whole ancestry is hidden in a past
Of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart
Among wolves on hills, on windswept crags
And treacherous keshes, where cold streams
Pour down the mountain and disappear 1360
Under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here
A frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
Above a mere; the overhanging bank
Is a maze of tree roots mirrored in its surface.
At night there, something uncanny happens:
The water burns. And the mere bottom
Has never been sounded by the sons of men.
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
The hart in flight from pursuing hounds
Will turn to face them with firm-set horns 1370
And die in the wood rather than dive
Beneath its surface. That is no good place.
When the wind blows up and stormy weather

Makes clouds scud and the skies weep,
Out of its depths a dirty surge
Is pitched towards the heavens. Now help depends
Again on you and you alone.
The gap of danger where the demon waits
Is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.
I will compensate you for settling the feud 1380
As I did last time with lavish wealth,
Coffers of coiled gold, if you come back.”

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
“Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
That will be his best and only bulwark.
So arise, my lord, and let us immediately 1390
Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.
I guarantee you: she will not get away,
Not to dens underground nor upland groves
Nor the ocean floor. She’ll have nowhere to flee to.
Endure your troubles today. Bear up
And be the man I expect you to be.”

With that the old lord sprung to his feet
And praised God for Beowulf’s pledge.
Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse
With the plaited mane. The wise king mounted 1400
The royal saddle and rode out in style
With a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths
Were marked all over with the monster’s tracks,
Her trail on the ground wherever she had gone
Across the dark moors, dragging away
The body of that thane, Hrothgar’s best

Counselor and overseer of the country.
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
Up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths
And ways where they were forced into single file, 1410
Ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.
He went in front with a few men,
Good judges of the lie of the land,
And suddenly discovered the dismal wood,
Mountain trees growing out at an angle
Above gray stones: the bloodshot water
Surged underneath. It was a sore blow
To all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
A hurt to each and every one
Of that noble company when they came upon 1420
Aechere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore
Kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn
Repeated its notes: the whole party
Sat down to watch. The water was infested
With all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
And monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
Serpents and wild things such as those that often
Surface at dawn to roam the sail-road
And doom the voyage. Down they plunged, 1430
Lashing in anger at the loud call
Of the battle bugle. An arrow from the bow
Of the Geat chief got one of them
As he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft
Stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water
Got less and less. It was his last swim.
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,
Prodded by barbed boar-spears,
Cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,
A strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch 1440

Men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf got ready,
Donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;
His mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail
Would soon meet with the menace under water.
It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
No enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
No vicious arm lock choke his life out.
To guard his head he had a glittering helmet
That was due to be muddied on the mere bottom
And blurred in the up swirl. It was of beaten gold, 1450
Princely headgear hooped and hasped
By a weapon-smith who had worked wonders
In days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;
Since then it had resisted every sword.
And another item lent by Unferth
At that moment was of no small importance:
The brehon handed him a hilted weapon,
A rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns 1460
Had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
The hand of anyone who had hefted it in battle,
Anyone who had fought and faced the worst
In the gap of danger. This was not the first time
It had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
Could hardly have remember the ranting speech
He had made in his cups. He was not man enough
To face the turmoil of a fight under water
And the risk to his life. So there he lost 1470
fame and repute. It was different for the other
Rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Wisest of kings, now that I have come
To the point of action, I ask you to recall
What we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane
And gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall
And suffer death while serving your cause,
Would act like a father to me afterwards.

If this combat kills me, take care 1480

Of my young company, my comrades in arms.

And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,
To send Hygelac the treasures I received.

Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold,

Let Hrethel’s son take note of it and see

That I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence

And enjoyed the good of his generosity.

And Unferth is to have what I inherited:

To that far-famed man I bequeath my own

Sharp-horned, wave-sheened wonder blade. 1490

With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die.

After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats

Was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly:

Without more ado, he dived in to the heaving

Depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day

Before he could see the solid bottom.

Quickly the one who haunted those waters,

Who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds

For a hundred seasons, sensed a human

Observing her outlandish lair from above. 1500

So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him

In her brutal grip; but his body, for all that,

Remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail

Saved him on the outside. Her savage talons

Failed to rip the web of his war shirt.

Then once she touched bottom, the wolfish swimmer

Carried the ring-mailed prince to her court
So that for all his courage he could never use
The weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde
Came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts 1510
Who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail
In a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man
Could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole
And yet the water did not work against him
Because the hall-roofing held off
The force of the current; then he saw firelight,
A gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell,
The tarn-hag in all her terrible strength,
Then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm: 1520
The decorated blade came down ringing
And singing on her head. But he soon found
His battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade
Refused to bite. It spared her and failed
The man in his need. It had gone through many
Hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armor
And helmets of the doomed, but here at last
The fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.

Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about
His name and fame: he never lost heart. 1530
Then, in fury, he flung his sword away.

The keen, inlaid, worm-looped-patterned steel
Was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely
On the might of his arm. So must a man do
Who intends to gain enduring glory
In a combat. Life doesn't cost him thought.
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to his fight
With Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder
And laid about him in a battle frenzy:
He pitched his killer opponent to the floor 1540

But she rose quickly and retaliated,
Grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.
The sure-footed fight fell daunted,
The strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.
So she pounced upon him and pulled out
A broad, whetted knife: now she could avenge
Her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail
On Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
Turned the edge and tip of the blade.
The son of Ecgtheow would surely have perished 1550
And the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
Had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
Not helped to save him: Holy God
Decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
The Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
Once Beowulf got back up on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well,
A sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom
From the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,
One that any warrior would envy, 1560
But so huge and heavy in itself
Only Beowulf could wield it in battle.
So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged,
Took a firm hold of the hilt and swung
The blade in an arc, a resolute blow
That bit into her neck bone
And severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
House of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

A light appeared and the place brightened 1570
The way the sky does when heaven's candle
Is shining clearly. He inspected the vault:
With sword held high, its hilt raised

To guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane
Scouted by the wall in Grendel's wake.
Now the weapon was to prove its worth.
The warrior determined to take revenge
For every gross act Grendel had committed--
And not only for that one occasion
When he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops, 1580
Fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards
Surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,
And as many again carried away,
A brutal plunderer. Beowulf in his fury
Now settled that score: he saw the monster
In his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,
A lifeless corpse, a casualty
Of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped
At the stroke dealt to it after death:
Beowulf cut the corpse's head off. 1590

Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout
With Hrothgar, watching the lake water,
Saw a heave-up and surge of waves
And blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,
Spoke in their sage, experienced way
About the good warrior, how they never again
Expected to see that prince returning
In triumph to their king. It was clear to many
That the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

The ninth hour of the day arrived. 1600
The brave Shieldings abandoned their cliff-top
And the king went home; but sick at heart,
Staring at the mere, the strangers held on.
They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,
Beowulf himself.

 Meanwhile, the sword

Began to wilt into gory icicles,
To slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
The way it all melted as ice melts
When the father eases the fetters off the frost
And unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power 1610
Over time and tide: He is the true Lord.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance
But carried no spoils from those quarters
Except for the head and the inlaid hilt
Embossed with jewels; its blade had melted
And the scrollwork on it burnt, so scalding was the blood
Of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.
Then away he swam, the one who had survived
The fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
The wide water, the waves and pools 1620
Were no longer infested once the wandering fiend
Let go of her life and this unreliable world.
The seafarers' leader made for land,
Resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
The mighty load he was lugging to the surface.
His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,
Thanking God and taking great delight
In seeing their prince back safe and sound.
Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt
Were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled, 1630
Clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away
Along footpath and trails through the fields,
Roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
With the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff,
Men kingly in their courage and capable
Of difficult work. It was a task for four
To hoist Grendel's head on a spear

And bear it under strain to the bright hall.
But soon enough they neared the place, 1640
Fourteen Geats in fine fettle,
Striding across the outlying ground
In a delighted throng around they leader.

In he came then, the thane's commander,
The arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
His courage was proven, his glory was secure.
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
Dragged across the floor where people were drinking,
A horror for both queen and company to behold.
They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight. 1650

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings,
We are glad to bring this booty from the lake.
It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you.
I barely survived the battle underwater.
It was hard-fought, a desperate affair
That could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,
The outcome would have been quick and fatal.
Although Hrunting is hard-edged,
I could never bring it to bear in battle. 1660
But the Lord of Men allowed me to behold--
For he often helps the unbefriended--
An ancient sword shinning on the wall,
A weapon made for giants, there for the wielding.
Then my moment came in the combat and I struck
The dwellers in that den. Next thing the damascened
Sword blade melted; it bloated and it burned
In their rushing blood. I have wrested the hilt
From the enemies' hand, avenged the evil
Done to the Danes; it is what was due. 1670
And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings:

You can sleep secure with your company of troops
In Heorot Hall. Never need you fear
For a single thane of your sept or nation,
Young warriors or old, that laying waste of life
That you and your people endured of yore.”

Then the gold hilt was handed over
To the old lord, a relic from long ago
For the venerable ruler. That rare smith work
Was passed on to the prince of the Danes 1680
When those devils perished; once death removed
That murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend,
Eliminating his unholy life
And his mother’s as well, it was willed that the king
Who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north
Was the best regarded between the two seas.

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
That relic of old times. It was engraved all over
And showed how war first came into the world
And the flood destroyed the tribe of giants. 1690
They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;
The Almighty made the waters rise,
Drowned them in the deluge for retribution.

In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards
There were rune markings correctly incised,
Stating and recording for whom the sword
Had been first made and ornamented
With its scrollwork hilt. Then everyone hushed
As the son of Halfdane spoke his wisdom.
“A protector of his people, pledged to uphold 1700
Truth and justice and to respect tradition,
Is entitled to affirm that this man
Was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,
Your fame has gone far and wide,

You are known everywhere. In all things you are even-tempered,
Prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship
We exchanged before. Forever you will be
Your people's mainstay and your own warriors'
Helping hand.

Heremod was different,
The way he behaved to Ecgwala's sons. 1710

His rise in the world brought little joy
To the Danish people, only death and destruction.
He vented his rage on people he caroused with,
Killed his own comrades, a pariah king
Who cut himself off from his own kind,
Even though God Almighty had made him
Eminent and powerful and marked him from the start
For a happy life. But a change happened,
He grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
To honor the Danes. He suffered in the end 1720
For having plagued his people for so long:
His life lost happiness.

So learn from this
And understand true values. I who tell you
Have wintered into wisdom.

It is a great wonder
How Almighty God in his magnificence
Favors our race with rank and scope
And the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.
Sometimes He allows the mind of a man
Of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
Grants him fulfillment and felicity on earth 1730
And forts to command in his own country.
He permits him to lord it in many lands
Until the man in his unthinkingness
Forgets that it will ever end for him.
He indulges his desires; illness and old age
Mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled

By envy or malice or thought of enemies
With their hate-honed swords. The whole world
Conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst
Until an element of overweening 1740
Enters him and takes hold
While the soul's guard, its sentry, drowns,
Grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,
An archer who draws a deadly bow.
And then the man is hit in the heart,
The arrow flies beneath his defenses,
The devious promptings of the demon start.
His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
He covets and resents; dishonors custom
And bestows no gold; and because of good things 1750
That the Heavenly powers gave him in the past
He ignores the shape of things to come.
Then finally the end arrives
When the body he was lent collapses and falls
Prey to its death; ancestral possessions
And the goods he hoarded and inherited by another
Who lets them go with a liberal hand.

“O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
Eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride. 1760
For a brief while your strength is in bloom
But it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
Illness or the sword to lay you low,
Or a sudden fire or surge of water
Or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
Or repellent age. Your piercing eye
Will dim and darken; and death will arrive,
Dear warrior, to sweep you away.

“Just so I ruled the ring-Danes' country

For fifty years, defended them in wartime 1770
With spear and sword against constant assaults
By many tribes: I came to believe
My enemies had faded from the face of the earth.
Still, what happened was a hard reversal
From bliss to grief. Grendel struck
After lying in wait. He laid waste the land
And from that moment my mind was in dread
Of his depredations. So I praise God
In His heavenly glory that I lived to behold
This head dripping blood and after such harrowing 1780
I can look upon it in triumph at last.
Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure
And move to the feast. Tomorrow morning
Our treasure will be shared and showered upon you.”

The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed
The old man's bidding; he sat on the bench.
And soon all was restored, the same as before.
Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,
And a banquet set forth; black night fell
And covered them in darkness. 1790

Then the company rose
For the old campaigner: the gray-haired prince
Was ready for bed. And a need for rest
Came over the brave shield-bearing Geat.
He was a weary sea-farer, far from home,
So immediately a house-guard guided him out,
One whose office entailed looking after
Whatever a thane on the road in those days
Might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

That great heart rested. The hall towered,
Gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it 1800
Until the black raven with raucous glee

Announced heaven's joy, and a hurry of brightness
Overran the shadows. Warriors rose quickly,
Impatient to be off: their own country
Was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager
Longed to be aboard his distant boat.
Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting
To be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth
Take the sword and thanked him for lending it.
He said he had found it a friend in battle 1810
And a powerful help; he put no blame
On the blade's cutting edge. He was a considerate man.

And there the warriors stood in their war-gear,
Eager to go, while their honored lord
Approached the platform where the other sat.
The undaunted hero addressed Hrothgar.
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Now we who crossed the wide sea
Have to inform you that we feel a desire
To return to Hygelac. Here we have been welcomed 1820
And thoroughly entertain. You have treated us well.
If there is any favor on earth I can perform
Beyond deeds of arms I have done already,
Anything that would merit your affections more,
I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.
If ever I hear from across the ocean
That people on your borders are threatening battle
As attackers have done from time to time,
I shall land with a thousand thanes at my back
To help your cause. Hygelac may be young 1830
To rule a nation, but this much I know
About the king of the Geats: he will come to my aid
And want to support me by word and action
In your hour of need, when honor dictates
That I raise a hedge of spears around you.

Then if Hrethric should think about traveling
As a king's son to the court of the Geats,
He will find many friend. Foreign places
Yield more to one who is himself worth meeting.”

Hrothgar spoke and answered him: 1840

“The Lord in his wisdom sent you those words
And they came from the heart. I have never heard
So young a man make truer observations.

You are strong in body and mature in mind,
Impressive in speech. If it should come to pass
That Hrethel's descendant dies beneath a spear,
If deadly battle or the sword blade or disease
Fells the prince who guards your people
And you are still alive, I firmly believe

The seafaring Geats won't find a man 1850

Worthier of acclaim as their king and defender
Than you, if only you would undertake
The lordship of your homeland. My liking for you
Deepens with time, dear Beowulf.

What you have done is to draw two peoples,
The Geat nation and us neighboring Danes,
Into shared peace and a pact of friendship
In spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past.

For as long as I rule this far-flung land
Treasures will change hands and each side will treat 1860

The other with gifts; across the gannet's bath,
Over the broad sea, whorled prows will bring
Presents and tokens. I know your people
Are beyond reproach in every respect,
Steadfast in the old way with friend or foe.”

Then the earl's defender furnished the hero
With twelve treasures and told him to set out,
Sail with those gifts safely home

To the people he loved, but to return promptly.
And so the good and gray-haired Dane, 1870
That high-born king, kissed Beowulf
And embraced his neck, then broke down
In sudden tears. Two forebodings
Disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
Nevermore would they meet each other
Face to face. And such was his affection
That he could not help being overcome:
His fondness for the man was so deep-founded,
It warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings
Tight in his breast. 1880

The embrace ended
And Beowulf, glorious in his gold regalia,
Stepped on the green earth. Straining at anchor
And ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.
So they went on their journey, and Hrothgar's generosity
Was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king
Until old age sapped his strength and did him
Mortal harm, as it has done so many.

Down to the waves then, dressed in the web
Of their chain-mail and war-shirts the young men marched
In high spirits. The coast-guard spied them, 1890
Thanes setting forth, the same as before.
His salute this time from the top of the cliff
Was far from unmannerly; he galloped to meet them
And as they took ship in their shinning gear,
He said how welcome they would be in Geatland.
Then the broad hull was beached on the sand
To be cargoes with treasure, horses and war-gear.
The curved prow motioned; the mast stood high
Above Hrothgar's riches in the loaded hold.

The guard who had watched the boat was given 1900

A sword with gold fittings and in future days
That present would make him a respected man
At his place on the mead-bench.

Then the keel plunged
And shook in the sea; and they sailed from Denmark.

Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl;
Sail ropes were tightened, timbers drummed
And stiff winds kept the wave-crosser
Skimming ahead; as she heaved forward,
Her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant,
A lapped prow loping over currents, 1910
Until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline
And familiar cliffs. The keel reared up,
Wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.

The harbor guard came hurrying out
To the rolling water: he had watched the offing
Long and hard, on the lookout for those friends.
With the anchor cables, he moored their craft
Right where it had beached, in case a backwash
Might catch the hull and carry it away.
Then he ordered the prince's treasure-trove 1920
To be carried ashore. It was a short step
From there to where Hrethel's son and heir,
Hygelac the gold-giver, makes his home
On a secure cliff, in the company of retainers.

The building was magnificent, the king majestic,
Ensconced in his hall; and although Hygd, his queen,
Was young, a few short years at court,
Her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure.
Haereth's daughter behaved generously
And stinted nothing when she distributed 1930
Bounty to the Geats.

Great Queen Modthryth

Perpetrated terrible wrongs.

If any retainer ever made bold

To look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's

Stared at her directly during daylight,

The outcome was sealed: he was bound

In hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured

Until doom was announced--death by the sword,

Slash of blade, blood gush and death qualms

In an evil display. Even a queen 1940

Outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that.

A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent

With loss of life for imagined insults.

But Hemming's kinsman put a halt to her ways

And drinkers round the table had another tale:

She was less of a bane to people's lives,

Less cruel-minded, after she was married

To the brave Offa, a bride arrayed

In her gold finery, given away

By a caring father, ferried to her young prince 1950

Over dim seas. In days to come

She would grace the throne and grow famous

For her good deeds and conduct of life,

Her high devotion to the hero king

Who was the best king, it has been said,

Between the two seas or anywhere else

On the face of the earth. Offa was honored

Far and wide for his generous ways,

His fighting spirit and his far-seeing

Defense of his homeland; from him there sprang Eomer, 1960

Garmund's grandson, kinsman of Hemming,

His warrior's mainstay and master of the field.

Heroic Beowulf and his band of men

Crossed the wide strand, striding along

The sandy foreshore; the sun shone,
The world's candle warmed them from the south
As they hastened to where, as they had heard,
The young king, Ongentheow's killer
And his people's protector, was dispensing rings
Inside his bawn. Beowulf's return 1970
Was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible,
News that the captain was now in the enclosure,
His battle-brother back from the fray
Alive and well, walking back to the hall.
Room was quickly made, on the king's orders,
And the troops filed across the cleared floor.

After Hygelac had offered greetings
To his loyal thane in lofty speech,
He and his kinsman, that hale survivor,
Sat face to face. Haereþ's daughter 1980
Moved about with the mead-jug in her hand,
Taking care of the company, filling the cups
That warriors held out. Then Hygelac began
To put courteous questions to his old comrade
In the high hall. He hankered to know
Every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell.

"How did you fare on your foreign voyage,
Dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided
To sail away across the salt water
And fight at Heorot? Did you help Hrothgar 1990
Much in the end? Could you ease the prince
Of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking
Cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome
Of your expedition and pleaded with you
Long and hard to leave the killer be,
Let the South-Danes settle their own
Blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked

Is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, 2030
No matter how admirable the bride may be.

“Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel,
Their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,
When he walks in with that woman to the feast:
Danes are at the table, being entertained,
Honored guest in glittering regalia,
Burnished ring-mail that was their hosts’ birthright,
Looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield
Their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went down 2040
With their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.

Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking,
Having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive
Memories of the massacre; his mood will darken
And heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion,
He will begin to test a young-man’s temper
And stir up trouble, starting like this:

“Now, my friend, don’t you recognize
Your father’s sword, his favorite weapon,
Then one he wore when he went out in his war-mask
To face the Danes on that final day? 2050

After Wethergeld died and his men were doomed
The Shieldings quickly took the field,
And now here’s the son of one or other
Of those same killers coming through our hall
Overbearing us, mouthing boasts,
And rigged in armor that by right is yours.’

And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,
Working things up with bitter words
Until one of the lady’s retainers lies
Spattered in blood, split open 2060

On his father’s account. The killer knows
The lie of the land and escaped with his life.
Then on both sides the oath-bound lords

Will break the peace, a passionate hate
Will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride
Will falter in him as the feud rankles.
I therefore suspect the good faith of the Heathobards,
The truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness
Of their alliance with the Danes.

But now, my lord,
I shall carry on with my account of Grendel, 2070
The whole story of everything that happened
In the hand-to-hand fight.

After heaven's gem
Had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit,
The terror of those twilights, came to attack us
Where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall.
There deadly violence came down on Handscio
And he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,
Rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks
Had come to grief in Grendel's maw:
He ate up the entire body. 2080

There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and furious,
All roused up, yet still unready
To leave the hall empty-handed;
Renowned for his might, he matched himself against me,
Wildly reaching. He had this roomy pouch,
A strange accoutrement, intricately strung
And hung at the ready, a rare patchwork
Of devilishly fitting dragon-skins.

I had done him no wrong, yet the raging demon
Wanted to cram me and many another 2090
Into this bag--but it was not to be
Once I got to my feet in a blind fury.
It would take too long to tell how I repaid
The terror of the land for every life he took
And so won credit for you, my king,
And for all your people. And although he got away

To enjoy life's sweetness for a while longer,
His right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,
Evidence of his miserable overthrow
As he dived into murk on the mere bottom. 2100

"I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes
For my part in the battle, beaten gold
And much else, once morning came
And we took our places at the banquet table.
There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,
A carrier of stories, recalled the early days.
At times some hero made the timbered harp
Tremble with sweetness, or related true
And tragic happenings; at times the king
Gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale, 2110
Or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,
Would begin to remember the martial deeds
Of his youth and prime and be overcome
As the past welled up in his wintry heart.

"We were happy there the whole day long
And enjoyed our time until another night
Descended upon us. Then suddenly
The vehement mother avenged her son
And wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her;
Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam 2120
Struck back and with bare-faced defiance
Laid a man low. Thus life departed
From the sage Auschere, an elder wise in council.
But afterwards, on the morning following,
The Danes could not burn the dead body
Nor lay the remains of the man they loved
On his funeral pyre. She had fled with the corpse
And taken refuge beneath torrents on the mountain.
It was a hard blow for Hrothgar to bear,

Harder than any he had undergone before. 2130
And so the heartsore king beseeched me
In your royal name to take my chances
Underwater, to win glory
And prove my worth. He promised me rewards.
Hence, as is well known, I went to my encounter
With the terror-monger at the bottom of the tarn.
For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,
Then blood went curdling along the currents
And I beheaded Grendel's mother in the hall
With a mighty sword. I barely managed 2140
To escape with my life; my time had not yet come.
But Halfdane's heir, the shelter of those earls,
Again endowed me with gifts in abundance.

“Thus the king acted with due custom.
I was paid and recompensed completely,
Given full measure and the freedom to choose
From Hrothgar's treasures by Hrothgar himself.
These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
To you as gifts. It is still upon your grace
That all favor depends. I have few kinsman 2150
Who are close, my king, except for your kind self.”
Then he order the boar-framed standard to be brought,
The battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt gray as hoar-frost
And the precious war-sword; and proceeded with his speech.
“When Hrothgar presented this war-gear to me
He instructed, my lord, to give you some account
Of why it signifies his special favor.
He said it had belonged to his older brother,
King Heorogar, who had long kept it,
But that Heorogar had never bequeathed it 2160
To his son Heorowearð, that worthy scion,
Loyal as he was.
Enjoy it well.”

I heard four horses were handed over next.
Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds
To go with the armor, swift gallopers,
All alike. So ought a kinsman act,
Instead of plotting and planning in secret
To bring people to grief, or conspiring to arrange
The death of comrades. The warrior king
Was uncle to Beowulf and honored by his nephew: 2170
Each was concerned for the other's good.

I heard he presented Hygd with a gorget,
The priceless torque that the prince's daughter,
Wealhtheow, had given him; and three horses,
Supple creatures, brilliantly saddled.
The bright necklace would be luminous on Hygd's breast.

Thus Beowulf bore himself with valor;
He was formidable in battle yet behaved with honor
And took no advantage: never cut down
A comrade who was drunk, kept his temper 2180
And, warrior that he was, watched and controlled
His God-sent strength and his outstanding
Natural powers. He had been poorly regarded
For a long time, was taken by the Geats
For less than he was worth: and their lord too
Had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
They firmly believed that he lacked force,
That the prince was a weakling; but presently
Every affront to his deserving was reversed.

The battle-famed king, bulwark of his earls, 2190
Ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel's
To be brought in; it was the best example
Of a gem-studded sword in the Geat treasury.

This he laid on Beowulf's lap
And then rewarded him with land as well,
Seven thousand hides, and a hall and a throne.
Both owned land by birth in that country,
Ancestral ground; but the greater right
And sway were inherited by the higher born.

A lot was to happen in later days 2200
In the fury of battle. Hygelac fell
And the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless
Against the fierce aggression of the Shylfings:
Ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,
They came against him and his conquering nation,
And with cruel force cut him down
So that afterwards

The wide kingdom
Reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
For fifty winters, grew old and wise
As warden of the land 2210

Until one began
To dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
From the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
Where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden passage,
Unknown to men, but someone managed
To enter by it and interfere
With the heathen trove. He had handled and removed
A gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing,
Though with a thief's wiles he had outwitted
The sleeping dragon; that drove him into rage,
As the people of that country would soon discover. 2220

The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
And moved him to wrath had never meant to.
It was desperation on the part of a slave
Fleeing the heavy hand of some master,

Guilt-ridden and on the run,
Going to ground. But he soon began
To shake with terror.....in shock
The wretch.....
.....panicked and ran
Away with the precious..... 2230

Metalwork. There were many other
Heirlooms heaped inside the earth-house,
Because long ago, with deliberate care,
Somebody now forgotten
Had buried the riches of a high-born race
In this ancient cache. Death had come
And taken them all in times gone by
And the only one left to tell their tale,
The last of their line, could look forward to nothing
But the same fate for himself: he foresaw that his joy 2240
In the treasure would be brief.

A newly constructed
Barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland
Close to the waves, its entryway secured.
Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried
All the goods and golden ware
Worth preserving. His words were few:
“Now, earth, hold what earls once held
And heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
By honorable men. My own people
Have been ruined in war; one by one 2250
They went down to death, looked their last
On sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
To bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,
Put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.
The hard helmet, hasped with gold,
Will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner
Who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;
The coat of mail that came through all fights,

Easily escape exile and woe
By the grace of God.

The hoard-guardian

Scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted
For the trespasser who had troubled his sleep.
Hot and savage, he kept circling and circling
The outside of the mound. No man appeared
In that desert waste, but he worked himself up
By imagining battle; then back in he'd go
In search of the cup, only to discover 2300
Signs that someone had stumbled upon
The golden treasures. The guardian of the mound,
The hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming
With fierce impatience; his pent-up fury
At the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back
And lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,
The day waned and he could wait no longer
Behind the wall, but hurtled forth
In a fiery blaze. The first to suffer
Were the people on the land, but before long 2310
It was their treasure-giver who would come to grief.

The dragon began to belch out flames
And burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow
That scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger
Would leave nothing alive in his wake.
Everywhere the havoc he wrought was in evidence.
Far and near, the Geat nation
Bore the brunt of his brutal assaults
And virulent hate. Then back to the hoard
He would dart before daybreak, to hide in his den. 2320
He had swinged the land, swathed it in flame,
In fire and burning, and now he felt secure
In the vaults of his burrow; but his trust was unavailing.

Then Beowulf was given bad news,
A hard truth: his own home,
The best of buildings, had been burnt to a cinder,
The throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero
Into deep anguish and darkened his mood:
The wise man thought he must have thwarted
Ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord, 2330
Broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil,
Unaccustomed anxiety and gloom
Confused his brain; the fire-dragon
Had rased the coastal region and reduced
Forts and earthworks to dust and ashes,
So the war-king planned and plotted his revenge.
The warriors' protector, prince of the hall-troop,
Ordered a marvelous all-iron shield
From his smithy works. He well knew
That linden boards would let him down 2340
And timber burn. After many trials,
He was destined to face the end of his days
In this mortal world; as was the dragon,
For all his leasehold on the treasure.

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud
To line up with a large army
Against the sky-plague. He had scant regard
For the dragon as a threat, no dread at all
Of its courage or strength, for he had kept going
Often in the past, through perils and ordeals 2350
Of every sort, after he had purged
Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot
And beaten Grendel. He outgrappled the monster
And his evil kin.

 One of his cruelest
Hand-to-hand encounters had happened
When Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed

In Friesland: the people's friend and lord,
Hrethel's son, slaked a sword blade's
Thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious
Gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety: 2360
He arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty
Battle-dresses, the booty he had won.
There was little for the Hetware to be happy about
As they shielded their faces and fighting on the ground
Began in earnest. With Beowulf against them,
Few could hope to return home.

Across the wide sea, desolate and alone,
The son of Ecgtheow swam back to his people.
There Hygd offered him throne and authority
As lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead, 2370
She had no belief in her son's ability
To defend their homeland against foreign invaders.
Yet there was no way the weakened nation
Could get Beowulf to give in and agree
To be elevated over Heardred as his lord
Or to undertake the office of kingship.
But he did provide support for the prince,
Honored and minded him until he matured
As the ruler of Geatland.

Then over sea-roads
Exiles arrived, sons of Ohthere. 2380
They had rebelled against the best of all
The sea-kings in Sweden, the one who held sway
In the Shylfing nation, their renowned prince,
Lord of the mead-hall. That marked the end
For Hygelac's son: his hospitality
Was mortally rewarded with wounds from a sword.
Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned
To the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf
To ascend the throne, to sit in majesty

And rule over the Geats. He was a good king. 2390

In days to come, he contrived to avenge
The fall of his prince; he befriended Eadgils
When Eadgils was friendless, aiding his cause
With weapons and warriors over the wide sea,
Sending him men. The feud was settled
On a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela.

And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived
Every extreme, excelling himself
In daring and in danger, until the day arrived
When he had to come face to face with the dragon. 2400
The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades
And went in a rage to reconnoiter.
By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction
Being visited on the people. The precious cup
Had come to him from the hand of the finder,
The one who had started all this strife
And was now added as a thirteenth to their number.
They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature
To be their guide. Against his will
He led them to the earth-vault he alone knew, 2410
An underground barrow near the sea-billows
And heaving waves, heaped inside
With exquisite metalwork. The one who stood guard
Was dangerous and watchful, warden of that trove
Buried under earth: no easy bargain
Would be made in that place by any man.

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
His hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
Unsettled yet ready, sensing his own death. 2420
His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:

It would soon claim his coffered soul,
Part life from limb. Before long
The prince's spirit would spin free from his body.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Many a skirmish I survived when I was young
And many times of war; I remember them well.

At seven, I was fostered out by my father,
Left in the charge of my people's lord.

King Hrethel kept me and took care of me, 2430
Was open-handed, behaved like a kinsman.

While I was his ward, he treated me no worse
As a wean about the place than one of his own boys,
Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac.

For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected
Deathbed was laid out, through a brother's doing,
When Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow
And loosed the arrow that destroyed his life.

He shot wide and buried a shaft 2440
In the flesh and blood of his own brother.

That offence was beyond redress, a wrong footing
Of the heart's affections; for who could avenge
The prince's life or pay his death-price?

It was like the misery felt by an old man
Who has lived to see his son's body
Swing on the gallows. He begins to keen
And weep for his boy, watching the raven
Gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help.

The wisdom of age is worthless to him. 2450
Morning after morning, he wakes to remember

That his child is gone; he has no interest
In living on until another heir

Is born in the hall, now that his first-born
Has entered death's dominion forever.

He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,

The banquet hall bereft of all delight,
The windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are sleeping,
The warriors underground; what was is no more.
No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard.
Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed 2460
And sings a lament; everything seems too large,
The steadings and the fields.

Such was the feeling
Of loss endured by the lord of the Geats
After Herebeald's death. He was hopelessly placed
To set to rights the wrong committed,
Could not punish the killer in accordance of the law
Of the blood-feud, although he felt no love for him.
Heartsore, wearied, he turned away
From life's joys, chose God's light
And departed, leaving buildings and lands 2470
To his sons, as a man of substance will.

“Then over the wide seas Swedes and Geats
Battled and feuded and fought without quarter.
Hostilities broke out when Hrethel died.
Ongentheow's sons were unrelenting,
Refusing to make peace, campaigning violently
From coast to coast, constantly setting up
Terrible ambushes around Hreasnshill.
My own kith and kin avenged
These evil events, as everybody knows, 2480
But the price was high: one of them paid
With his life. Heathcyn, lord of the Geats,
Met his fate there and fell in battle.
Then, as I have heard, Hygelac's sword
Was raised in the morning against Ongentheow,
His brother's killer. When Eofor cleft
The old Swede's helmet, halved it open,
He fell, death-pale: his feud-calloused hand

Could not stave off the fatal stroke.

“The treasures that Hygelac lavished on me 2490
I paid for as I fought, as fortune allowed me,
With my glittering sword. He gave me land
And the security land brings, so he had no call
To go looking for some lesser champion,
Some mercenary among the Grifthas
Or the Spear-Danes or the men of Sweden.

I marched ahead of him, always there
At the front of the line; and I shall fight like that
For as long as I live, as long as this sword
Shall last, which has stood me in good stead 2500
Late and soon, ever since I killed
Dayraven the Frank in front of the two armies.
He brought back no looted breastplate
To the Frisian king, but fell in battle,
Their standard-bearer, high-born and brave.
No sword blade sent him to his death,
My bare hands stilled his heartbeats
And wrecked the bone-house. Now blade and hand,
Sword and sword-stroke, will assay the hoard.”

Beowulf spoke, made a formal boast 2510
For the last time: “I risked my life
Often when I was young. Now I am old,
But as king of this people I shall pursue this fight
For the glory of winning, if the evil one will only
Abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open.”

Then he addressed each dear companion
One final time, those fighters in their helmets,
Resolute and high-born: “I would rather not
Use a weapon if I knew another way
To grapple with the dragon and make good my boast 2520

Heat was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized
A human voice, the time was over
For peace and parleying. Pouring forth
In a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster
Burst from the rock. There was a rumble underground.
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior
Lifted his shield: the outlandish thing 2560
Writhed and convulsed and viciously
Turned on the king, whose keen-edged-sword,
And heirloom inherited by ancient right,
Was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
Each antagonist struck terror in the other.
Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
By his tall shield, sure of his ground,
While the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
And racing toward its fate. Yet his shield defended 2570
The renowned leader's life and limb
For a shorter time than he meant it to:
That final day was the first time
When Beowulf fought and fate denied him
Glory in battle. So the king of the Geats
Raised his hand and struck hard
At the enameled scales, but hardly cut through:
The blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
Was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
Had need of at the moment. The hoard-keeper 2580
Went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
When he felt the stroke, battle-fire
Billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled
Of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
Infallible before that day,
Failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
To have to give ground like that and go

Unwillingly to inhabit another home
In a place beyond; so every man must yield 2590
The leasehold of his days.

Before long
The fierce contenders clashed again.
The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up
And got a new wind; he who had once ruled
Was furlled in fire and had to face the worst.
No help or backing was to be had then
From his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
Broke ranks and ran for their lives
To the safety of the wood. But within one heart
Sorrow welled up: in a man of worth 2600
The claims of kinship cannot be denied.

His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,
A well-regarded Shylfing warrior
Related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord
Tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
He remember the bountiful gifts he bestowed on him,
How well he lived among the Waegmundings,
The freehold he inherited from his father before him.
He could not hold back: one hand brandished
The yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword-- 2610
An ancient blade that was said to have belonged
To Eanmund, the son of Ohthere, the one
Weohstan had slain when he was in exile without friends.
He carried the arms to the victim's kinfolk,
The burnished helmet, the webbed chain-mail
And that relic of the giants. But Onela returned
The weapons to him, rewarded Weohstan
With Eadmund's war-gear. He ignored the blood-feud,
The fact that Eadmund was his brother's son.

Weohstan kept that war-gear for a lifetime, 2620
The sword and the mail-shirt, until it was the son's turn
To follow his father and perform his part.
Then, in old age, at the end of his days
Among the Weather-Geats, he bequeathed to Wiglaf
Innumerable weapons.

And now the youth
Was to enter the line of battle with his lord,
His first time to be tested as a fighter.
His spirit did not break and the ancestral blade
Would keep its edge, as the dragon discovered
As soon as they came together in combat. 2630

Sad at heart, addressing his companions,
Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:
"I remember that time when the mead was flowing,
How we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
Promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,
Make good the gift of the war-gear,
Those swords and helmets, as and when
His need required it. He picked us out
From the army deliberately, honored us and judged us
Fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts-- 2640
And all because he considered us the best
Of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although
He wanted this challenge to be the one he'd face
By himself alone--the shepherd of our land,
A man unequalled in the quest for glory
And a name for daring--now the day has come
When this lord we serve needs sound men
To give him their support. Let us go to him,
Help our leader through the hot flame
And dread of the fire. As God is my witness, 2650
I would rather my body were robbed in the same
Burning blaze as my gold-giver's body

Than go back home bearing arms.
That is unthinkable, unless we have first
Slain the foe and defended the life
Of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know
That things he has done for us deserve better.
Should he alone be left exposed
To fall in battle? We must bond together,
Shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword.” 2660

Then he wadded the dangerous reek and went
Under arms to his lord, saying only:
“Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
You said you would when you were still young
And vowed you would never let your name and fame
Be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
So stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now
With the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you.”

After those word, a wildness rose
In the dragon again and drove it to attack, 2670
Heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,
The humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
Charred it to the boss, and the body armor
On the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered
In sparks and ashes.

Inspired again
By the thought of glory, the war-king threw
His whole strength behind a sword-stroke
And connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped. 2680
Beowulf’s ancient iron-gray sword
Let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
To be helped in combat by the cutting-edge
Of weapons made of iron. When he yielded a sword,
No matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade

His hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,
Was mad to attack for a third time.
When a chance came, he caught the hero 2690
In a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
Into his neck. Beowulf's body
Ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
Saw the king in danger at his side
And displayed his inborn bravery and strength.
He left the head alone, but his fighting hand
Was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid.
He lunged at the enemy lower down
So that his decorated sword sank into its belly 2700
And the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king
Gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
He carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep into the dragon's flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;
That pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,
Had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,
Be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,
This would be the last of his many labors 2710
And triumphs in the world.

Then the wound
Dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
To scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
Deadly poison suppurating inside him,
Surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,
The prince realized his state and struggled

Towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze
On those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork
Was braced with arches built over columns.
And now that thane unequalled for goodness 2720
With his own hands washed his lord's wounds,
Swabbed the weary prince with water,
Bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds,
Mortal wounds, he still spoke
For he well knew his days in the world
Had been lived out to the end: his allotted time
Was drawing to a close, death was very near.

“Now is the time when I would have wanted
To bestow this armor on my own son, 2730
Had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir
And live on in his flesh. For fifty years
I ruled this nation. No king
Of any neighboring clan would dare
Face me with troops, none had the power
To intimidate me. I took what came,
Cared for and stood by things in my keeping,
Never fomented quarrels, never
Swore to a lie. All this consoles me,
Doomed as I am and sickening for death; 2740
Because of my right way, the Ruler of Mankind
Need never blame me when the breath leaves my body
For murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly,
Dearest Wiglaf, under the gray stone
Where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure;
Hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard.
Away you go: I want to examine
That ancient gold, gaze my fill
On those garnered jewels; my going will be easier

For having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go
Of the life and lordship I have long maintained.”

2750

And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan
Quickly obeyed the command of his languishing
War-weary lord; he went in his chain-mail
Under the rock-piled roof of the barrow,
Exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat
A treasure-trove of astonishing richness,
Wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,
Glittering gold spread across the ground,
The old dawn-scorching serpent’s den
Packed with goblets and vessels of the past,
Tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets
All eaten away. Armbands everywhere,
Artfully wrought. How easily treasure
Buried in the ground, gold hidden
However skillfully, can escape from any man!

2760

And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold,
Hanging high over the hoard,
A masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light
So he could make out the ground at his feet
And inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was no
Remaining sign: the sword had dispatched him.
Then, the story goes, a certain man
Plundered the hoard in the immemorial howe,
Filled his arms with flagons and plates,
Anything he wanted; and took the standard also,
Most brilliant of banners.

2770

Already the blade
Of the old king’s sharp killing-sword
Had done its worst: the one who had for long
Minded the hoard, hovering over gold,
Unleashing fire, surging forth

2780

Midnight after midnight, had been mown down.

Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,
Excited by the treasure. Anxiety weighed
On his brave heart--he was hoping he would find
The leader of the Geats alive where he had left him
Helpless, earlier, on the open ground.
So he came to the place, carrying the treasure,
And found his lord bleeding profusely,
His life at an end: again he began 2790
To swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance
Broke out from the king's breast-cage.
The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

“To the everlasting Lord of All,
To the King of Glory, I give thanks
That I beheld this treasure here in front of me,
That I have been allowed to leave my people
So well endowed on the day I die.
Now that I have bartered my last breath
To own this fortune, it is up to you 2800
To look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.
Order my troop to construct a barrow
On a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.
It will loom in the horizon at Hronesness
And be a reminder among my people--
So that in coming times crews under sail
Will call it Beowulf's barrow, as they steer
Ships across the wide and shrouded waters.”

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
The collar of gold from his neck and gave it 2810
To the young thane, telling him to use
It and the war shirt and the gilded helmet well.

Through the life they had been lent.

Before long

The battle-dodgers abandoned the wood,
The ones who had let down their lord earlier,
The tail-turners, ten of them together.
When he needed them the most, they had made off.
Now they were ashamed and came behind shields, 2850
In their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay.
They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out,
A comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord,
Trying in vain to bring him round with water.
Much as he wanted to, there was no way
He could preserve his lord's life on earth
Or alter in the least the Almighty's will.
What God judged right would rule what happened
To every man, as it does to this day.

Then a stern rebuke was bound to come 2860
From the young warrior to the ones who had been cowards.
Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke
Disdainfully and in disappointment:
"Anyone ready to admit the truth
Will surely realize the lord of men
Who showered you with gifts and gave you the armor
You are standing in--when he would distribute
Helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-benches,
A prince treating his thanes in hall
To the best he could find, far or near-- 2870
Was throwing weapons uselessly away.
It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.
Beowulf had little cause to brag
About his armed guard; yet God who ordains
Who wins or loses allowed him to strike
With his own blade when bravery was needed.

There was little I could do to protect his life
In the heat of the fray, yet I found new strength
Welling up when I went to help him.
Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults 2880
Of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed
Less strongly from his head. But when the worst happened
Too few rallied around the prince.

“So it is goodbye now to all you know and love
On your home-ground, the open-handedness,
The giving of war-swords. Every one of you
With freeholds of land, our whole nation,
Will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
Get tidings of how you turned and fled
And disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner 2890
Die than live a life of shame.”

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be reported
To those camped on the ridge, that crowd of retainers
Who had sat all morning, sad at heart,
Shield-bearers wondering about
The man they loved: would this day be his last
Or would he return. He told the truth
And did not balk, the rider who bore
News to the cliff-top. He addressed them all:
“Now the people’s pride and love, 2900
The lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed,
Brought down by the dragon’s attack.
Beside him lies the bane of his life,
Dead from knife-wounds. There was no way
Beowulf could manage to get the better
Of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits
At Beowulf’s side, the son of Weohstan,
The living warrior watching by the dead,
Keeping weary vigil, holding a wake

For the loved and the loathed. 2910

Now war is looming
Over our nation, soon it will be known
To Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
That the king is gone. Hostility has been great
Among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth
At the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:
There the Hetware harried and attacked
And overwhelmed him with great odds.
The leader in his war-gear was laid low,
Fell amongst followers; that lord did not favor
His company with spoils. The Merovingian king 2920
Has been an enemy to us ever since.

“Nor do I expect peace of pact-keeping
Of any sort from the Swedes. Remember:
At Ravenswood, Ongentheow
Slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel’s son,
When the Geat people in their arrogance
First attacked the fierce Shylfings.
The return blow was quickly struck
By Ohthere’s father. Old and terrible,
He felled the sea-king and saved his own 2930
Aged wife, the mother of Onela
And of Ohthere, bereft of her gold rings.
Then he kept hard on the heels of the foe
And drove them, leaderless, lucky to get away,
In a desperate route to Ravenswood.
His army surrounded the weary remnant
Where they nursed their wounds; all through the night
He howled threats at those huddled survivors,
Promises to axe their bodies open
When dawn broke, dangle them from gallows 2940
To feed the birds. But at first light
When their spirits were lowest, relief arrived.

They heard the sound of Hygelac's horn,
His trumpet calling as he came to find them,
The hero in pursuit, at hand with troops.

“The bloody swathe that Swedes and Geats
Cut through each other was everywhere.
No one could miss their murderous feuding.
Then the old man made his move,
Pulled back, barred his people in: 2950
Ongentheow withdrew to higher ground.
Hygelac's pride and prowess as a fighter
Were known to the earl; he had no confidence
That he could hold out against that horde of seamen,
Defend wife and the ones he loved
From the shock of the attack. He retreated for shelter
Behind the earth wall. Then Hygelac swooped
On the Swedes at bay, his banners swarmed
Into their refuge, the Geat forces
Drove forward to destroy the camp. 2960
There in his gray hairs, Ongentheow
Was cornered, ringed around with swords.
And it came to pass that the king's fate
Was in Eofor's hands, and in his alone.
Wulf, son of Wonred, went for him in anger,
Split him open so that blood came spurting
From under his hair. The old hero
Still did not flinch, but parried fast,
Hit back with a harder stroke:
The king turned and took him on. 2970
Then Wonred's son, the brave Wulf,
Could land no blow against the aged lord.
Ongentheow divided his helmet
So that he buckled and bowed his bloodied head
And dropped to the ground. But his doom held off.
Though he was cut deep, he recovered again.

“With his brother down, the undaunted Eofor,
Hygelac’s thane, hefted his sword
And smashed murderously at the massive helmet
Past the lifted shield. And the king collapsed, 2980
The shepherd of people was sheared of life.

“Many then hurried to help Wulf,
Bandaged and lifted him, now that they were left
Masters of the blood-soaked battleground.
One warrior stripped the other,
Looted Ongentheow’s iron mail-coat,
His hard sword-hilt, his helmet too,
And carried the graith to King Hygelac;
He accepted the prize, promised fairly
That reward would come, and kept his word. 2990
For their bravery in action, when they arrived home
Eofor and Wulf were overloaded
By Hrethel’s son, Hygelac the Geat,
With gifts of land and linked rings
That were worth a fortune. They had won glory,
So there was no gainsaying his generosity.
And he gave Eofor his only daughter
To bide at home with him, an honor and a bond.

“So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,
This vicious feud, I am convinced, 3000
Is bound to revive; they will cross our borders
And attack in force once they find out
That Beowulf is dead. In days gone by
When our warriors fell and we were undefended
He kept our coffers and our kingdoms safe.
He worked for the people, but as well as that
He behaved like a hero.

 We must hurry now

To take a last look at the king
And launch him, lord and lavisher of rings,
On the funeral road. His royal pyre 3010
Will melt no small amount of gold:
Heaped there in the hoard, it was bought at heavy cost,
And that pile of rings he paid for at the end
With his own life will go up in flames,
Be furl'd in fire: treasure no follower
Will wear in his memory, nor lovely woman
Link and attach as a torque around her neck--
But often, repeatedly, in the path of exile
They shall walk bereft, bowed under woe,
Now that their leader's laugh is silenced, 3020
High spirits quenched. Many a spear
Dawn-cold to the touch will be taken down
And waved on high; the swept harp
Won't waken warriors, but the raven winging
Darkly over the doomed will have news,
Tidings of the eagle of how he hoked and ate,
How the wolf and he made short work of the dead."

Such was the drift of the dire report
That gallant man delivered. He got little wrong
In what he told and predicted. 3030

The whole troop

Rose in tears, then took their way
To the uncanny scene under Earnaness.
There, on the sand, where his soul had left him,
They found him at rest, their ring-giver
From days gone by. The great man
Had breathed his last. Beowulf the King
Had indeed met with a marvelous death.

But what they saw first was far stranger:
The serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,

Lying facing him. The fire-dragon 3040
Was scaresomely burnt, scorched all colors.
From head to tail, his entire length
Was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth
On the night air once, then winged back
Down to his den; but death owned him now,
He would never enter his earth-gallery again.
Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,
Silent flagons, precious swords
Eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been
While they waited their thousand winters underground. 3050
That huge cache, gold inherited
From an ancient race, was under a spell--
Which meant no one was ever permitted
To enter the king-hall unless God himself,
Mankind's Keeper, True King of Triumphs,
Allowed some person pleasing him--
And in his eyes worthy--to open the hoard.

What came about brought to nothing
The hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden
Riches under the rock face. First the dragon slew 3060
That man among men, who in turn made fierce amends
And settled the feud. Famous for his deeds
A warrior may be, but it remains a mystery
Where his life will end, when he may no longer
Dwell in the mead-hall among his own.
So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty
And cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was ignorant
Of how his departure from the world would happen.
The high-born chiefs who had buried the treasure
Declared it until doomsday so accursed 3070
That whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong
And grimly punished for their transgression,
Hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.

Yet Beowulf's gaze at the gold treasure
When he first saw it had not been selfish.

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:

“Often when one man follows his own will
Many are hurt. This happened to us.
Nothing we advised could ever convince
The prince we loved, our land's guardian, 3080

Not to vex the custodian of the gold,
Let him lie where he was long accustomed,
Lurk there under the earth until the end of the world.
He held to his high destiny. The hoard is laid bare,
But at a grave cost; it was too cruel a fate
That forced the king to that encounter.

I have been inside and seen everything
Amassed in the vault. I managed to enter
Although no great welcome awaited me
Under the earth wall. I quickly gathered up 3090

A huge pile of the priceless treasures
Handpicked from the hoard and carried them here
Where the king could see them. He was still himself,
Alive, aware, and in spite of his weakness
He had many requests. He wanted me to greet you
And order the building of a barrow that would crown
The site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,
In a commanding position, since of all men
To have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth
His worth and due as a warrior were the greatest. 3100

Now let us again go quickly
And feast our eyes on that amazing fortune
Heaped under the wall. I will show the way
And take you close to those coffers packed with rings
And bars of gold. Let a bier be made
And got ready quickly when we come out
And then let us bring the body of our lord,

The man we loved, to where he will lodge
For a long time in the care of the Almighty.”

Then Weohstan’s son, stalwart to the end, 3110
Had orders given to owners of dwellings,
Many people of importance in the land,
To fetch wood from far and wide
For the good man’s pyre.

“Now shall flame consume
Our leader in battle, the blaze darken
Round him who stood his ground in the steel-hail,
When the arrow-storm shot from bowstrings
Pelted from the shield-wall. The shaft hit home.
Feather-fledged, it finned the barb in flight.”

Next the wise son of Weohstan 3120
Called from among the king’s thanes
A group of seven: he selected the best
And entered with them, the eighth of their number,
Under the God-cursed roof; one raised
A lighted torch and led the way.

No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard
For it was obvious to them that every bit of it
Lay unprotected within the vault,
There for the taking. It was no trouble
To hurry to work and haul out 3130
The priceless store. They pitched the dragon
Over the cliff top, let tide’s flow
And backwash take the treasure-minder.
Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart
In great abundance, and the gray-haired leader,
The prince of his bier, born to Hronesness.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
Stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,

Hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
And shining armor, just as he had ordered. 3140

Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
Mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
Funeral fires; fumes of wood smoke
Billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
And drowned out their weeping, wind died down
And flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
Burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
And wailed aloud for their lord's decease.

A Geat woman too sang out in grief: 3150
With hair bound up, she unburdened herself
Of her worst fears, a wild litany
Of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
Enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
Slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the Geat people began to construct
A mound on a headland, high and imposing,
A marker that sailors could see from far away,
And in ten days they had done the work.
It was their hero's memorial; what remained from fire 3160
They housed inside it, behind a wall

As worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.
And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels
And a trove of such things as trespassing men
Had once dared to drag from the hoard.
They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,
Gold under gravel, gone to earth,
As useless to men now as it ever was.

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
Chieftain's sons, champions in battle, 3170
All of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
Mourning his loss as a man and a king.

They extolled his heroic exploits
And gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
For a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
And cherish his memory when that moment comes
When he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
Sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
He was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
Kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

3180