Beowulf

Only one copy of the Old English poem that modern editors call *Beowulf* has survived, and it is likely that it has survived only by accident. A manuscript containing *Beowulf* and a small collection of other texts—a poetic treatment of the deuterocanonical Old Testament story of Judith, a prose life of St Christopher, and two treatises of fantastical geography now known as *The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*—was copied by two scribes, probably in the decade after 1000, in a monastic center somewhere in the south of England. It is an eclectic anthology containing prose and verse, hagiography and secular heroism, oriental and biblical and Germanic lore; its contents baffle our modern expectations of genre. The texts are from different sources, and the prose pieces are all translations of Latin works. What unites them, apparently, is an interest in monsters and marvels, faraway places and long-distant ages, and fantastic beings of extraordinary size; in his 1995 book, Orchard described its contents as "Pride and Prodigies." Whatever its original purpose or audience, the book fell into obscurity in the centuries after the Norman Conquest in 1066, and its later history is unknown until 1563, when the English antiquary Laurence Nowell (c. 1515–71) signed his name on the first page of *St. Christopher*. The Nowell Codex, as it is sometimes called, later came into the library of the collector Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631); the present-day shelfmark of the manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv) recalls the arrangement of Cotton's library, in which books were stored in shelves surmounted by busts of Roman emperors. Cotton bound the manuscript with an unrelated twelfth-century copy of Augustine's *Soliloquies* and other works. In 1731, while Cotton's collection was stored at Ashburnham House in Westminster awaiting donation to the future British Museum, a disastrous fire damaged or destroyed hundreds of volumes and nearly consumed the *Beowulf* manuscript as well.

Apart from a notice in an early manuscript catalog by Humphrey Wanley in 1705, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that scholars began to appreciate the contents of this scorched and charred manuscript. The romantic nationalism of the time expected—indeed, more or less required—that at the beginning of every great nation's literature would stand a national epic analogous to the Greek *Iliad*. The French had the *Chanson de Roland*, the Germans the *Nibelungenlied*; *Beowulf*, the earliest full-length heroic poem in any Germanic language, was claimed by the English (because of its language), the Danes (because of its subject), and the Germans (because of its setting in the pre-Christian north). The first printed notice of the poem, along with some badly translated passages, was in Sharon Turner's second edition of his *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1805), where it is called "a composition most curious and important. ... [I]t may be called an Anglo-Saxon epic poem." In 1787 a copyist who was probably commissioned by the scholar Grímur Thorkelin (1752–1829), an Icelander in the service of Denmark, made a transcription of the poem; later Thorkelin himself went to the British Museum to make another. Like Turner, Thorkelin's inability to read Old English did not prevent him from admiring *Beowulf*. He was convinced that the poem was originally composed in Danish, even though it survived in an English translation, and that its author had been an eyewitness to the funeral of the hero Beowulf, which he placed in the year 340. These theories are nonsense, but Thorkelin's transcripts are still invaluable evidence for many readings now lost from the crumbling edges of the manuscript's pages.

Although, like other Old English poems, *Beowulf* is copied on its manuscript pages from margin to margin like prose, the poem consists of 3,182 extant lines of alliterative verse, divided into 43 numbered sections of varying length with an unnumbered prologue. Its language is allusive and embellished and its plot complex and digressive, but its story is relatively straightforward. The Danish king Hrothgar, descendant of the legendary Scyld, has built a magnificent hall Heorot, but the hall

is invaded night after night by a marauding beast named Grendel (sec. 1–2). A young warrior of the tribe of the Geats named Beowulf hears of Hrothgar's troubles and comes to his rescue; after a series of challenges and boasts he faces Grendel unarmed, and tears off the monster's arm in a wild wrestling match (3–12). Celebration is lively but short-lived; the next night the monster's mother attacks the hall in revenge for the death of her son, killing one of Hrothgar's most trusted retainers (13–19). Undaunted, Beowulf follows her tracks to an underwater lair and, after a difficult fight, kills her with an extraordinary sword that he finds in her cave (20–23). He returns to the Danish hall to much praise, celebration, and gift-giving; soon he returns to his native land and recounts his adventures to his own king and uncle Hygelac (24–31).

The story of Beowulf follows the narrative patterns of a folktale: a hero who quests and fights in isolation from friends and family, fabulous battles against monstrous foes, the theme of a young man who was thought to be lazy (lines 2183–89) but later becomes a mighty hero, even the concatenation of three challenges in ascending order of difficulty. The fabulous outlines of the story equally recall the broad brushstrokes of myth: the mighty Beowulf may be a distant echo of Thor; his descent into the mere may dimly depict a shamanistic initiation; his death may contain a hint of Ragnarok, the northern apocalypse. *Beowulf*, then, appears to be a reflex of an ancient and universal plot.

Whatever its underlying structural patterns, *Beowulf* is neither myth nor folktale; its stories of dragon-slaying and nocturnal struggles are set against a complex background of legendary history. The action of the poem unfolds on a roughly recognizable map of Scandinavia: Hrothgar's hall Heorot has been plausibly placed in the village of Lejre on the Danish island of Zealand, and we may tentatively identify Beowulf's tribe of Geats with the historical Gautar of southern Sweden. The mythical figure of Scyld soon yields to the historical figure of Hrothgar, and a number of the poem's characters—among them Heremod, Hrothgar, Ingeld, and Hygelac—are mentioned in other sources and were certainly regarded as figures of history rather than fable. The Frankish historian Gregory of Tours (d. 594) mentions the disastrous raid of Hygelac (whom he calls Chlochilaicus and describes as a Danish king) and dates it around the year 520. And, like its characters and setting, the concerns of the poem are historical. Behind the drama of isolated hand-to-hand encounters against monstrous adversaries, *Beowulf* is an intensely political poem; the poet is as intrigued by Danish diplomacy and the bitter feud between the Geats and Swedes as he is by the hero's battles. Kingdoms and successions, alliances and truces, loyalties and the tragically transient stability of heroic society are the poem's somber subtext, a theme traced less in the clashes of the battlefield than in the patterns of marriage and kin, in stories remembered and retold, in allusion and digression and pointed foreshadowing.

Whatever historical interests may be found in *Beowulf*, however, it is difficult to read the poem with anything like a modern expectation of historical accuracy. Like many medieval works, *Beowulf* is frustratingly ambivalent—it is not quite mythical enough to be read apart from the history it purports to contain, nor historical enough to furnish clear evidence for the past it poetically recreates. The action of the poem is set in a somewhat vague heroic *geardagum* ("bygone days," line 1), an age not meant to be counted on a calendar, nor its kingdoms and tribes marked on a map; nor, undoubtedly, were the monstrous races of Grendels and dragons so clearly distinct in the poet's mind from the real dangers of the real world just beyond the margins of the known. While medieval authors certainly made distinctions between *historia* and *fabula*, the boundaries between these terms are not nearly as impermeable as those of our modern categories "history" and "fable."

Both the ultimate and the proximate origins of *Beowulf* are unknown. Most scholars assume that the surviving manuscript is a copy of an earlier written text and is probably the last in a long chain of copies. Moreover, the poem begins with the assumption that we are hearing a familiar story, or at least a story from a familiar milieu: "We have heard of the glory … of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes" (*We Gar-Dena … peodcyninga prym gefrunon*), the poet asserts, and his cryptic allusions throughout the poem suggest that his audience was already familiar with a larger repertoire of songs and stories of kings and heroes.

There is a great deal at stake in the arguments over the poem's origins. *Beowulf* will be read differently if it is imagined to have been produced in the time of Bede (c. 725) or Alfred (c. 880) or Ælfric (c. 1000). The earlier we think the poem to be, the more potentially authentic its historical material; a later *Beowulf*, more openly fictional, is a more complex and "literary" work. Moreover, the more closely we try to assign a date and place of origin to the poem, the more closely we must read it as a text, the intention of a single author or a reflection of a particular ideology, rather than a product of an oral poetic art whose composition may have been collective and whose traditional roots are beyond discovery.

Most critics agree that the heroic action of the poem is thoroughly accommodated to a Christian paradigm; they disagree, however, on the meaning and purpose of that accommodation. *Beowulf* is a secular Christian poem about pagans that avoids the easy alternatives of automatic condemnation or enthusiastic anachronism. While early scholars tried to find a single source for the poem's complex and peculiar texture—whether in pure Germanic paganism or orthodox Augustinian Christianity—more recent work recognizes that *Beowulf*, like the culture of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, reflects a variety of interdependent and competing influences and attitudes, even a certain tension inherent in the combination of biblical, patristic, secular Latin, and popular Germanic material. The search for a single "audience" of *Beowulf*, and with it a sense of a single meaning, has given way to a recognition of a plurality of readers and interests in Anglo-Saxon England.

The author of the poem (for the sake of argument, let us say the person who was responsible for its commitment to parchment) was certainly a Christian: the technology of writing in the Anglo-Saxon period was almost entirely confined to monastic scriptoria. The manuscript in which *Beowulf* is preserved contains a saint's legend and a versified Bible story. Moreover the poet indicates a clear familiarity with the Bible and expects the same from his audience. Though the paganism of Beowulf's world is downplayed, however, it is not denied; his world is connected to that of the audience but separated by the gulf of conversion as much as by the seas of migration.

Beowulf seeks to explore both the bridges and the chasms between the pagan past and the Christian present; it teaches secular readers how to be pious, moral, and thoughtful about their own history, mindful of fame and courage while aware of its limitations and dangers. The poem is a Christian author's imaginative recreation of a pagan mentality, similar in some respects to Bede's eloquent simile of the sparrow, which he places in the mouth of one of King Edwin's retainers in the *Ecclesiastical History* I.30—the warm but fleeting pleasures of life are placed against the somber background of its ultimate meaninglessness, and without the hope of conversion or salvation all that is available to make sense of the world are courage, honor, and a stoical acceptance of one's fate, whether good or bad.

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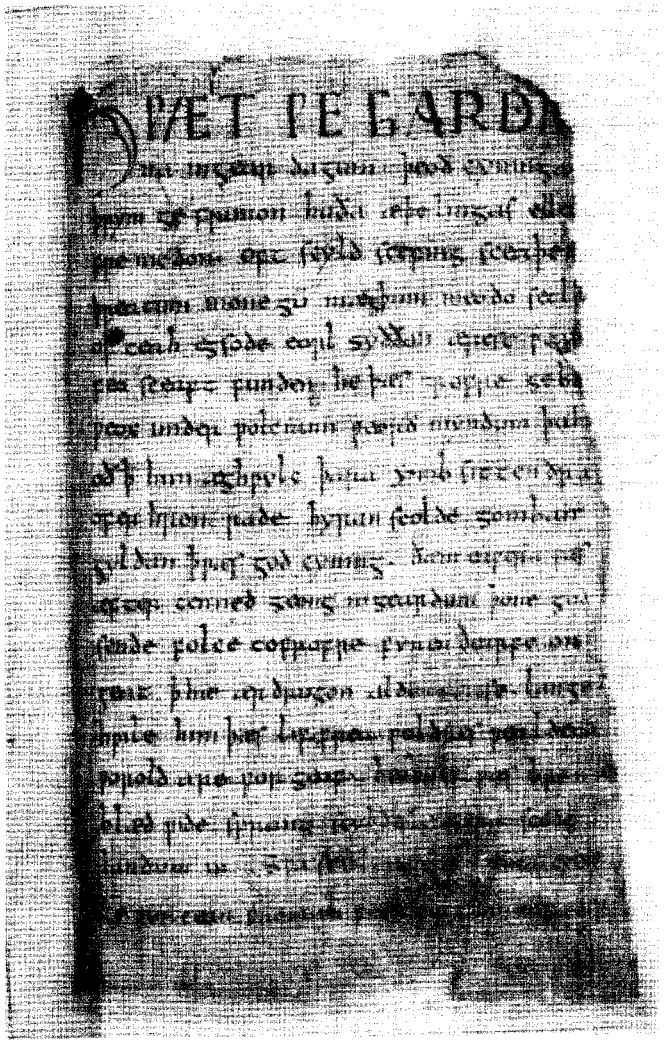


Beowulf, lines 1–21
(British Library, Ms Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 129r).

Beowulf[1]

PROLOGUE

Listen!
We have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes,[2]
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.
Often Scyld Scefing[3] seized the mead-benches
from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that—
he—grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
over the whale's-riding[4] had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!
A boy was later born to him,
young in the courts, whom God sent
as a solace to the people—he saw their need,
the dire distress they had endured, lordless,
for such a long time. The Lord of Life,
Wielder of Glory, gave him worldly honor;
Beowulf,[5] the son of Scyld, was renowned,
his fame spread wide in Scandinavian lands.
Thus should a young man bring about good
with pious gifts from his father's possessions,
so that later in life loyal comrades
will stand beside him when war comes,
the people will support him—with praiseworthy deeds
a man will prosper among any people.
Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;
they bore him down to the brimming sea,
his dear comrades, as he himself had commanded
while the friend of the Scyldings[6] wielded speech—
that dear land-ruler had long held power.
In the harbor stood a ring-prowed ship,
icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;
there they laid down their dear lord,
dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship,
glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures
loaded there, adornments from distant lands;
I have never heard of a more lovely ship
bedecked with battle-weapons and war-gear,
blades and byrnies.[7] In its bosom lay
many treasures, which were to travel
far with him into the keeping of the flood.
With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,
the wealth of nations, than those did who
at his beginning first sent him forth
alone over the waves while still a small child.[8]
Then they set a golden ensign
high over his head, and let the waves have him,
gave him to the sea with grieving spirits,
mournful in mind. Men do not know
how to say truly—not trusted counselors,
nor heroes under the heavens—who received that cargo.

I

Then Beowulf Scylding, beloved king,
was famous in the strongholds of his folk
for a long while—his father having passed away,
a lord from earth—until after him arose
the great Healfdene, who held the glorious Scyldings
all his life, ancient and fierce in battle.
Four children, all counted up,
were born to that bold leader of hosts:
Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,

[1] *Beowulf* This translation is by R.M. Liuzza from the edition published by Broadview Press.

[2] *spear-Danes* The Danes are described by many different epithets in the poem; see the Glossary of Proper Names for further instances.

[3] *Scyld Scefing* The name means "Shield, Son of Sheaf (i.e., of grain)." The mysterious origins of Scyld, who seems to arrive providentially from nowhere and is returned to the sea after his death, have occasioned much critical speculation.

[4] *whale's-riding* A condensed descriptive image of the sea—the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the "gannet's bath" and the "swan's riding."

[5] *Beowulf* Not the monster-slaying hero of the title, but an early Danish king. Many scholars argue that the original name was Beow.

[6] *Scyldings* The Danes, "sons of Scyld."

[7] *byrnies* Coat of ring-mail.

[8] *With no fewer … small child* Scyld was found destitute—this statement is an example of litotes, or ironic understatement, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

I heard that ...[1] was Onela's queen,
dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylfing.
Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,
honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen
eagerly served him, until the young soldiers grew
into a mighty troop of men. It came to his mind
that he should order a hall-building,
have men make a great mead-house
which the sons of men should remember forever,[2]
and there within he would share everything
with young and old that God had given him,
except for the common land and the lives of men.
Then the work, as I've heard, was widely proclaimed
to many nations throughout this middle-earth,
to come adorn the folk-stead. It came to pass
swiftly among men, and it was soon ready,
the greatest of halls; he gave it the name "Heorot,"[3]
he whose words were heeded far and wide.
He remembered his boast; he gave out rings,
treasure at table. The hall towered
high and horn-gabled—it awaited hostile fires,
the surges of war; the time was not yet at hand
when the sword-hate of sworn in-laws
should arise after ruthless violence.[4]
A bold demon who waited in darkness
wretchedly suffered all the while,
for every day he heard the joyful din
loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,
the clear song of the scop.[5] He who knew
how to tell the ancient tale of the origin of men
said that the Almighty created the earth,
a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
to light their beams for those who dwell on land,
adorned the distant corners of the world
with leaves and branches, and made life also,
all manner of creatures that live and move.
—Thus this lordly people lived in joy,
blessedly, until one began
to work his foul crimes—a fiend from hell.
This grim spirit was called Grendel,
mighty stalker of the marches, who held
the moors and fens; this miserable man
lived for a time in the land of giants,
after the Creator had condemned him
among Cain's race—when he killed Abel
the eternal Lord avenged that death.[6]
No joy in that feud—the Maker forced him
far from mankind for his foul crime.
From thence arose all misbegotten things,
trolls and elves and the living dead,
and also the giants who strove against God
for a long while[7]—He gave them their reward for that.

2

When night descended he went to seek out
the high house, to see how the Ring-Danes
had bedded down after their beer-drinking.
He found therein a troop of nobles
asleep after the feast; they knew no sorrow
or human misery. The unholy creature,
grim and ravenous, was ready at once,
ruthless and cruel, and took from their rest
thirty thanes;[8] thence he went
rejoicing in his booty, back to his home,
to seek out his abode with his fill of slaughter.

[1] ... A name is missing from the manuscript here; it has been conjectured from parallel sources that it should be Yrse, or Ursula. The Swedish ("Scylfing") king Onela appears later in the story, causing much distress to Beowulf's nation.

[2] *a great ... forever* Or "a greater mead-hall / than the sons of men had ever heard of." The reading adopted here is that of Mitchell and Robinson.

[3] *Heorot* "Hart." An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart.

[4] *it awaited ... violence* The hall Heorot is apparently fated to be destroyed in a battle between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld the Heathobard, a conflict predicted by Beowulf in 2024–69. The battle itself happens outside the action of the poem.

[5] *scop* Poet-singer. This is the first of several self-reflexive scenes of poetic entertainment in the poem.

[6] *Cain's race ... that death* The story of Cain and Abel is told in Genesis 4.1–16.

[7] *misbegotten things ... long while* The poet lists a collection of Germanic, classical, and biblical horrors; all are ultimately traced to their biblical roots, though the characters in the poem are not aware of this.

[8] *thanes* A "thane" is a retainer, one of the troop of companions surrounding a heroic king in Germanic literature.

When in the dim twilight just before dawn
Grendel's warfare was made known to men,
then lamentation was lifted up after the feasting,
a great morning-sound. Unhappy sat
the mighty lord, long-good nobleman;
he suffered greatly, grieved for his thanes,
once they beheld that hostile one's tracks,
the accursed spirit; that strife was too strong,
loathsome and long.
It was no long wait,
but the very next night he committed
a greater murder, mourned not at all
for his feuds and sins—he was too fixed in them.
Then it was easy to find a thane
who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,
a bed in the outbuildings,[1] when they pointed out—
truly announced with clear tokens—
that hall-thane's hate; he who escaped the fiend
held himself afterwards farther away and safer.
So he ruled, and strove against right,
one against all, until empty stood
the best of houses. And so it was for a great while—
for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
great sorrow, when to the sons of men
it became known, and carried abroad
in sad tales, that Grendel strove
long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
sins and feuds, for many seasons,
perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
with any man of the Danish army,
nor ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money,
nor did any of the counselors need to expect
bright compensation from the killer's hands,[2]
for the great ravager relentlessly stalked,
a dark death-shadow, lurked and struck
old and young alike, in perpetual night
held the misty moors. Men do not know
whither such whispering demons wander about.
Thus the foe of mankind, fearsome and solitary,
often committed his many crimes,
cruel humiliations; he occupied Heorot,
the jewel-adorned hall, in the dark nights—
he saw no need to salute the throne,
he scorned the treasures; he did not know their love.[3]
That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes,
crushing his spirit. Many a strong man sat
in secret counsel, considered advice,
what would be best for the brave at heart
to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
At times they offered honor to idols
at pagan temples, prayed aloud
that the soul-slayer[4] might offer assistance
in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
the hope of heathens—they remembered hell
in their minds, they did not know the Maker,
the Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
Wielder of glory. Woe unto him
who must thrust his soul through wicked force
in the fire's embrace, expect no comfort,
no way to change at all! It shall be well for him
who can seek the Lord after his deathday
and find security in the Father's embrace.

3

With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene
seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero
turn aside his woe—too great was the strife,
long and loathsome, which befell that nation,
violent, grim, cruel, greatest of night-evils.
Then from his home the thane of Hygelac,[5]

[1] *outbuildings* Hrothgar's hall is apparently surrounded by smaller buildings, including the women's quarters (see lines 662–65, 920–24). Under normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle (1239–50).

[2] *bright compensation from the killer's hands* Germanic and Anglo-Saxon law allowed that a murderer could make peace with the family of his victim by paying compensation, or *wergild*. The amount of compensation varied with the rank of the victim.

[3] *Thus the foe ... love* This is a much-disputed passage; my reading follows a suggestion made by Fred C. Robinson in "Why Is Grendel's Not Greeting the *gifstol* a *wræc micel*?" and repeated in Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf*.

[4] *soul-slayer* I.e., the Devil. In the Middle Ages the gods of the pagans were often regarded as demons in disguise.

[5] *Hygelac* The hero is not named until more than a hundred lines later. Hygelac is his uncle and king. (Referred to as Chlochilaicus and described as a Danish king by Gregory Tours [d. 594], it is likely that Hygelac was a familiar historical figure.)

a good man among the Geats, heard of Grendel's deeds—
he was of mankind the strongest of might
in those days of this life,
noble and mighty. He commanded to be made
a good wave-crosser, said that he would seek out
that war-king over the swan's-riding,
the renowned prince who was in need of men.
Wise men did not dissuade him at all
from that journey, though he was dear to them;
they encouraged his bold spirit, inspected the omens.
From the Geatish nation that good man
had chosen the boldest champions, the best
he could find; as one of fifteen
he sought the sea-wood. A wise sailor
showed the way to the edge of the shore.
The time came—the craft was on the waves,
moored under the cliffs. Eager men
climbed on the prow—the currents eddied,
sea against sand—the soldiers bore
into the bosom of the ship their bright gear,
fine polished armor; the men pushed off
on their wished-for journey in that wooden vessel.
Over the billowing waves, urged by the wind,
the foamy-necked floater flew like a bird,
until in due time on the second day
the curved-prowed vessel had come so far
that the seafarers sighted land,
shining shore-cliffs, steep mountains,
wide headlands—then the waves were crossed,
the journey at an end. Thence up quickly
the people of the Weders[1] climbed onto the plain,
moored their ship, shook out their mail-shirts,
their battle-garments; they thanked God
that the sea-paths had been smooth for them.

When from the wall the Scyldings' watchman,
whose duty it was to watch the sea-cliffs,
saw them bear down the gangplank bright shields,
ready battle-gear, he was bursting with curiosity
in his mind to know who these men were.
This thane of Hrothgar rode his horse
down to the shore, and shook mightily
his strong spear, and spoke a challenge:

[1] *Weders* I.e., the Geats.

"What are you, warriors in armor, wearing
coats of mail, who have come thus sailing
over the sea-road in a tall ship,
hither over the waves? Long have I been
the coast-warden, and kept sea-watch
so that no enemies with fleets and armies
should ever attack the land of the Danes.
Never more openly have there ever come
shield-bearers here, nor have you heard
any word of leave from our warriors
or consent of kinsmen. I have never seen
a greater earl on earth than that one among you,
a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,
honored only in weapons—unless his looks belie him,
his noble appearance! Now I must know
your lineage, lest you go hence
as false spies, travel further
into Danish territory. Now, you sea-travelers
from a far-off land, listen to my
simple thought—the sooner the better,
you must make clear from whence you have come."

4

The eldest one answered him,
leader of the troop, unlocked his word-hoard:
"We are men of the Geatish nation
and Hygelac's hearth-companions.
My father was well-known among men,
a noble commander named Ecgtheow;
he saw many winters before he passed away,
ancient, from the court; nearly everyone
throughout the world remembers him well.
With a friendly heart have we come
seeking your lord, the son of Healfdene,
guardian of his people; be of good counsel to us!
We have a great mission to that famous man,
ruler of the Danes; nor should any of it be
hidden, I think. You know, if things are
as we have truly heard tell,
that among the Scyldings some sort of enemy,
a hidden evildoer, in the dark nights
makes known his terrible mysterious violence,
shame and slaughter. With a generous spirit

I can counsel Hrothgar, advise him how,
wise old king, he may overcome this fiend—
if a change should ever come for him,
a remedy for the evil of his afflictions,
and his seething cares turn cooler;
or else forever afterwards a time of anguish
he shall suffer, his sad necessity, while there stands
in its high place the best of houses."

The watchman spoke, as he sat on his horse,
a fearless officer: "A sharp shield-warrior
must be a judge of both things,
words and deeds, if he would think well.
I understand that to the Scylding lord
you are a friendly force. Go forth, and bear
weapons and armor—I shall guide your way;
and I will command my young companions
to guard honorably against all enemies
your ship, newly-tarred, upon the sand,
to watch it until the curved-necked wood
bears hence across the ocean-streams
a beloved man to the borders of the Weders—
and such of these good men as will be granted
that they survive the storm of battle."
They set off—their vessel stood still,
the roomy ship rested in its riggings,
fast at anchor. Boar-figures shone
over gold-plated cheek-guards,[1]
gleaming, fire-hardened; they guarded the lives
of the grim battle-minded. The men hastened,
marched together, until they could make out
the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned—
the most famous building among men
under the heavens—where the high king waited;
its light shone over many lands.
Their brave guide showed them the bright court
of the mighty ones, so that they might go
straight to it; that fine soldier
wheeled his horse and spoke these words:
"Time for me to go. The almighty Father
guard you in his grace,
safe in your journeys! I must to the sea,
and hold my watch against hostile hordes."

[1] *Boar-figures ... cheek-guards* The boar was a sacred animal in Germanic mythology; in his *Germania* the Roman historian Tacitus mentions warriors wearing boar-images into battle (ch. 45). Images of boars were placed on helmets to protect the wearer from the "bite" of a sword, which was often quasi-personified as a serpent. Archaeologists have unearthed several Anglo-Saxon helmets with various kinds of boar-images on them.

5

The road was stone-paved, the path led
the men together. Their mail-coats shone
hard, hand-linked, bright rings of iron
rang out on their gear, when right to the hall
they went trooping in their terrible armor.
Sea-weary, they set their broad shields,
wondrously-hard boards, against the building's wall;
they sat on a bench—their byrnies rang out,
their soldiers' war-gear; their spears stood,
the gear of the seamen all together,
a gray forest of ash. That iron troop
was worthy of its weapons.
Then a proud warrior[2]
asked those soldiers about their ancestry:
"From whence do you carry those covered shields,
gray coats of mail and grim helmets,
this troop of spears? I am herald and servant
to Hrothgar; never have I seen
so many foreign men so fearless and bold.
For pride, I expect, and not for exile,
and for greatness of heart you have sought out Hrothgar."
The courageous one answered him,
proud prince of the Weders, spoke words
hardy in his helmet: "We are Hygelac's
board-companions—Beowulf is my name.
I wish to explain my errand
to the son of Healfdene, famous prince,
your lord, if he will allow us,
in his goodness, to greet him."
Wulfgar spoke—a prince of the Wendels,
his noble character was known to many,
his valor and wisdom: "I will convey
to the friend of the Danes, lord of the Scyldings,
giver of rings, what you have requested,
tell the famous prince of your travels,
and then quickly announce to you the answer
which that good man sees fit to give me."

[2] *proud warrior* Later identified as Wulfgar.

He hastily returned to where Hrothgar sat
old and gray-haired, with his band of earls;
he went boldly, stood by the shoulder
of the Danish king—he knew the noble custom.
Wulfgar spoke to his friend and lord:
"There have arrived here over the sea's expanse,
come from afar, men of the Geats;
the chief among them the warriors call
Beowulf. They bring a request,
my lord, that they might be allowed
to exchange words with you—do not refuse them
your reply, gracious Hrothgar!
In their war-trappings they seem worthy
of noble esteem; notable indeed is that chief
who has shown these soldiers the way hither."

6

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
"I knew him when he was nothing but a boy—
his old father was called Ecgtheow,
to whom Hrethel the Geat[1] gave in marriage
his only daughter; now his daring son
has come here, sought a loyal friend.
Seafarers, in truth, have said to me,
those who brought to the Geats gifts and money
as thanks, that he has thirty
men's strength, strong in battle,
in his handgrip. Holy God
in His grace has guided him to us,
to the West-Danes, as I would hope,
against Grendel's terror. To this good man
I shall offer treasures for his true daring.
Be hasty now, bid them enter
to see this troop of kinsmen all assembled;
and tell them in your words that they are welcome
to the Danish people."
He announced from within:[2]
"My conquering lord commands me to tell you,
ruler of the East-Danes, that he knows your ancestry,
and you are to him, hardy spirits,
welcome hither from across the rolling waves.
Now you may go in your war-gear
under your helmets to see Hrothgar,
but let your battle-shields and deadly spears
await here the result of your words."
The mighty one arose, and many a man with him,
powerful thanes; a few waited there,
guarded their battle-dress as the bold man bid them.
They hastened together as the man led them,
under Heorot's roof; [the warrior went][3]
hardy in his helmet, until he stood on the hearth.
Beowulf spoke—his byrnie gleamed on him,
war-net sewn by the skill of a smith:
"Be well, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's kinsman
and young retainer; in my youth I have done
many glorious deeds. This business with Grendel
was made known to me on my native soil;
seafarers say that this building stands,
most excellent of halls, idle and useless
to every man, after evening's light
is hidden under heaven's gleaming dome.
Then my own people advised me,
the best warriors and the wisest men,
that I should, lord Hrothgar, seek you out,
because they knew the might of my strength;
they themselves had seen me, bloodstained from battle,
come from the fight, when I captured five,
slew a tribe of giants, and on the salt waves
fought sea-monsters by night, survived that tight spot,
avenged the Weders' affliction—they asked for trouble!—
and crushed those grim foes; and now with Grendel,
that monstrous beast, I shall by myself have
a word or two with that giant. From you now I wish,
ruler of the Bright-Danes, to request
a single favor, protector of the Scyldings,
that you should not refuse, having come this far,
protector of warriors, noble friend to his people,—
that I might alone, o my own band of earls
and this hardy troop, cleanse Heorot.
I have also heard that this evil beast
in his wildness does not care for weapons,

[1] *Hrethel the Geat* Father of Hygelac and grandfather of Beowulf.

[2] *people ... within* There is no gap in the manuscript, but the two halves of the line do not alliterate, and something is probably missing from the text at this point. Most editors add two half-lines with the sense "Then Wulfgar went to the door."

[3] *[the warrior went]* A half-line is missing; the translation follows the most innocuous conjecture.

so too will I scorn—so that Hygelac,
my liege-lord, may be glad of me—
to bear a sword or a broad shield,
a yellow battle-board, but with my grip
I shall grapple with the fiend and fight for life,
foe against foe. Let him put his faith
in the Lord's judgment, whom death takes!
I expect that if he is allowed to win, he will
eat unafraid the folk of the Geats
in that war-hall, as he has often done,
the host of the Hrethmen. You'll have no need
to cover my head[1]—he will have it,
gory, bloodstained, if death bears me away;
he will take his kill, think to taste me,
will dine alone without remorse,
stain his lair in the moor; no need to linger
in sorrow over disposing of my body!
Send on to Hygelac, if battle should take me,
the best battledress, which my breast wears,
finest of garments; it is Hrethel's heirloom,
the work of Weland.[2] Wyrd[3] always goes as it must!"

7

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
"For past favors, my friend Beowulf,
and for old deeds, you have sought us out.
Your father struck up the greatest of feuds,
when he killed Heatholaf by his own hand
among the Wylfings. When the Weder tribe
would not harbor him for fear of war,
thence he sought the South-Dane people
over the billowing seas, the Honor-Scyldings;
then I first ruled the Danish folk
and held in my youth this grand kingdom,
city of treasure and heroes—then Heorogar
was dead, my older brother unliving,
Healfdene's firstborn—he was better than I!
Later I settled that feud with fee-money;
I sent to the Wylfings over the crest of the waves
ancient treasures; he swore oaths to me.[4]
It is a sorrow to my very soul to say
to any man what Grendel has done to me—
humiliated Heorot with his hateful thoughts,
his sudden attacks. My hall-troop,
my warriors, are decimated; wyrd has swept them away
into Grendel's terror. God might easily
put an end to the deeds of this mad enemy!
Often men have boasted, drunk with beer,
officers over their cups of ale,
that they would abide in the beer-hall
Grendel's attack with a rush of sword-terror.
Then in the morning this mead-hall,
lordly dwelling, was drenched with blood,
when daylight gleamed, the benches gory,
the hall spattered and befouled; I had fewer
dear warriors when death took them away.
Now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall,[5]
the reward of victory, as your mood urges."
Then a bench was cleared in the beer-hall
for the men of the Geats all together;
the strong-minded men went to sit down,
proud in their strength. A thane did his service,
bore in his hands the gold-bright ale-cup,
poured the clear sweet drink. The scop sang
brightly in Heorot—there was the joy of heroes,
no small gathering of Danes and Geats.

[1] *cover my head* A burial custom. Beowulf grimly jokes that there will be no need to trouble with funeral expenses if Grendel wins this fight; he will have no head to bury.

[2] *Weland* Legendary blacksmith of the Norse gods. The antiquity of weapons and armor added to their value.

[3] *Wyrd* The Old English word for "fate"; it is sometimes quasi-personified, though apparently not to the extent that the goddess Fortuna was in Roman poetic mythology. The word survives, via Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as the Modern English word "weird."

[4] *I sent ... me* Hrothgar pays the *wergild* for the man Ecgtheow killed, and Ecgtheow swears an oath of loyalty and support. It is this oath, passed on to the next generation, that Beowulf is fulfilling (at least this is Hrothgar's public sentiment; his thoughts in the privacy of his council are somewhat different).

[5] *Now sit ... hall* The meaning of this line in Old English is disputed.

8

Unferth[1] spoke, son of Ecglaf,
who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord,
unbound his battle-runes[2]—Beowulf's journey,
that brave seafarer, sorely vexed him,
for he did not wish that any other man
on this middle-earth should care for glory
under the heavens, more than he himself:
"Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca
in a swimming contest on the open sea,
where in your pride you tried the waves
and for a foolish boast risked your life
in the deep water? No man, whether
friend or foe, could dissuade you two
from that sad venture, when you swam in the sea;
there you seized in your arms the ocean-streams,
measured the sea-ways, flailed your hands
and glided over the waves—the water roiled,
wintry surges. In the keeping of the water
you toiled for seven nights, and he outswam you,
and had more strength. Then in the morning
the swells bore him to the Heathoream shore;
from thence he sought his own sweet land,
beloved by his people, the land of the Brondings,
the fair fortress, where he had his folk,
his castle and treasure. He truly fulfilled,
the son of Beanstan, his boast against you.
So I expect a worse outcome from you—
though you may have survived the storm of battle,
some grim combats—if for Grendel you dare
to lie in wait the whole night long."
Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"What a great deal, Unferth my friend,
drunk with beer, you have said about Breca,
told his adventures! I will tell the truth—
I had greater strength on the sea,
more ordeals on the waves than any other man.
When we were just boys we two agreed
and boasted—we were both still
in our youth—that out on the great ocean
we would risk our lives, and we did just that.
We had bare swords, when we swam in the sea,
hard in our hands; we thought to protect
ourselves from whales. Not for anything
could he swim far from me on the sea-waves,
more swiftly on the water, nor would I go from him.
We two were together on the sea
for five nights, until the flood drove us apart,
surging waves, coldest of weathers,
darkening night, and a northern wind,
knife-sharp, pushed against us. The seas were choppy;
the fishes of the sea were stirred up by it.
There my coat of armor offered help,
hard, hand-locked, against those hostile ones,
my woven battle-dress lay on my breast
adorned with gold. Down to the ocean floor
a grisly foe dragged me, gripped me fast
in his grim grasp, yet it was given to me
to stab that monster with the point of my sword,
my war-blade; the storm of battle took away
that mighty sea-beast, through my own hand.

9

"Time and again those terrible enemies
sorely threatened me. I served them well
with my dear sword, as they deserved.
They got no joy from their gluttony,
those wicked maneaters, when they tasted me,
sat down to their feast on the ocean floor—
but in the morning, wounded by my blade,
they were washed ashore by the ocean waves,
dazed by sword-blows, and since that day
they never hindered the passage of any
sea-voyager. Light shone from the east,
God's bright beacon; the waves grew calm,
so that I could see the sea-cliffs,
the windswept capes. *Wyrd* often spares
an undoomed man, when his courage endures!
And so it was that with my sword I slew
nine of these sea-monsters. I have never heard
of a harder night-battle under heaven's vault,
nor a more wretched man on the water's stream;
yet I escaped alive from the clutches of my enemies,
weary from my journey. Then the sea washed me up,
the currents of the flood, in the land of the Finns,
the welling waters. I have never heard a word
about any such contest concerning you,
such sword-panic. In the play of battle
Breca has never—nor you either—
done a deed so bold and daring
with his decorated blade—I would never boast of it!—
though you became your brothers' killer,
your next of kin; for that you needs must suffer
punishment in hell, no matter how clever you are.[1]
I will say it truly, son of Ecglaf,
that never would Grendel have worked such terror,
that gruesome beast, against your lord,
or shames in Heorot, if your courage and spirit
were as fierce as you yourself fancy they are;
but he has found that he need fear no feud,
no storm of swords from the Victory-Scyldings,
no resistance at all from your nation;
he takes his toll, spares no one
in the Danish nation, but indulges himself,
hacks and butchers and expects no battle
from the Spear-Danes. But I will show him
soon enough the strength and courage
of the Geats in war. Afterwards, let him who will
go bravely to mead, when the morning light
of a new day, the sun clothed in glory,
shines from the south on the sons of men!"
Then the giver of treasure was greatly pleased,
gray-haired and battle-bold; the Bright-Danes' chief
had faith in his helper; that shepherd of his folk
recognized Beowulf's firm resolution.
There was the laughter of warriors, lovely sounds
and winsome words. Wealhtheow went forth,
Hrothgar's queen, mindful of customs;
adorned with gold, she greeted the men in the hall,
then that courteous wife offered the full cup
first to the guardian of the East-Danes' kingdom,
bid him be merry at his beer-drinking,
beloved by his people; with pleasure he received
the feast and cup, victorious king.
The lady of the Helmings then went about
to young and old, gave each his portion
of the precious cup, until the moment came
when the ring-adorned queen, of excellent heart,
bore the mead-cup to Beowulf;
she greeted the Geatish prince, thanked God
with wise words that her wish had come to pass,
that she could rely on any earl for relief
from those crimes. He took the cup,
the fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow,
and then eager for battle he made his announcement.
Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"I resolved when I set out over the waves,
sat down in my ship with my troop of soldiers,
that I would entirely fulfill the wishes
of your people, or fall slain,
fast in the grip of my foe. I shall perform
a deed of manly courage, or in this mead-hall
I will await the end of my days!"
These words well pleased that woman,
the boasting of the Geat; she went, the gold-adorned
and courteous folk-queen, to sit beside her lord.
Then, as before, there in that hall were
strong words spoken, the people happy,
the sounds of a victorious nation, until shortly
the son of Healfdene wished to seek
his evening rest; he knew that the wretched beast
had been planning to do battle in the high building
from the time they could first see the sunrise
until night fell darkening over all,
and creatures of shadow came creeping about
pale under the clouds. The company arose.
One warrior greeted another there,
Hrothgar to Beowulf, and wished him luck,
gave him control of the wine-hall in these words:
"I have never entrusted to any man,
ever since I could hold and hoist a shield,
the great hall of the Danes—except to you now.
Have it and hold it, protect this best of houses,

[1] *Unferth* Unferth's name, which may be significant, means either "un-peace" or "un-reason." In the manuscript it is always spelled "Hunferth," though it alliterates with a vowel. His position at Hrothgar's feet appears to be one of honor.

[2] *unbound his battle-runes* Or "unleashed his hostile secret thoughts." *Run* in Old English often means "secret."

[1] *though you became ... you are* Unferth's fratricide brings the general theme of kin-slaying, represented by Grendel's descent from Cain, inside Hrothgar's hall. In reality—at least in the reality of the heroic world depicted in poetry—it may not have been unthinkable for kinsmen to find themselves on opposite sides of a battle; loyalty to one's lord was supposed to outweigh the claims of blood-relation. The word "hell" is not in the manuscript, but it is attested by one of the early transcriptions. In their translation, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson read *healle*, i.e., "hall."

be mindful of glory, show your mighty valor,
watch for your enemies! You will have all you desire,
if you emerge from this brave undertaking alive."

10

Then Hrothgar and his troop of heroes,
protector of the Scyldings, departed the hall;
the war-chief wished to seek Wealhtheow,
his queen's bedchamber. The glorious king[1]
had set against Grendel a hall-guardian
—as men had heard said—who did special service
for the king of the Danes, kept guard against a giant.
Surely the Geatish prince greatly trusted
his mighty strength, the Maker's favor,
when he took off his iron byrnie,
undid his helmet, and gave his decorated sword,
most excellent iron, to his servant
and bid him hold his battle-gear.
The good man, Beowulf the Geat,
spoke a few boasting words before he lay down:
"I consider myself no poorer in strength
and battle-deeds than Grendel does himself;
and so I will not kill him with a sword,
put an end to his life, though I easily might;
he knows no arts of war, no way to strike back,
hack at my shield-boss, though he be brave
in his wicked deeds; but tonight we two will
forego our swords, if he dare to seek out
a war without weapons—and then let the wise Lord,
the holy God, grant the judgment of glory
to whichever hand seems proper to Him."
Battle-brave, he lay down; the bolster took
the earl's cheek, and around him many
a bold seafarer sank to his hall-rest.
None of them thought that he should thence
ever again seek his own dear homeland,
his tribe or the town in which he was raised,
for they had heard it said that savage death
had swept away far too many of the Danish folk
in that wine-hall. But the Lord gave
a web of victory to the people of the Weders,
comfort and support, so that they completely
overcame their enemy through one man's craft,
by his own might. It is a well-known truth
that mighty God has ruled mankind
always and forever.
In the dark night he came
creeping, the shadow-goer. The bowmen slept
who were to hold that horned hall—
all but one. It was well-known to men
that the demon foe could not drag them
under the dark shadows if the Maker did not wish it;
but he, wakeful, keeping watch for his enemy,
awaited, enraged, the outcome of battle.

11

Then from the moor, in a blanket of mist,
Grendel came stalking—he bore God's anger;
the evil marauder meant to ensnare
some of human-kind in that high hall.
Under the clouds he came until he clearly knew
he was near the wine-hall, men's golden house,
finely adorned. It was not the first time
he had sought out the home of Hrothgar,
but never in his life, early or late,
did he find harder luck or a hardier hall-thane.
To the hall came that warrior on his journey,
bereft of joys. The door burst open,
fast in its forged bands, when his fingers touched it;
bloody-minded, swollen with rage, he swung open
the hall's mouth, and immediately afterwards
the fiend strode across the paved floor,
went angrily; in his eyes stood
a light not fair, glowing like fire.
He saw in the hall many a soldier,
a peaceful troop sleeping all together,
a large company of thanes—and he laughed inside;
he meant to divide, before day came,
this loathsome creature, the life of each man
from his body, when there befell him
the hope of a feast. But it was not his fate
to taste any more of the race of mankind
after that night. The kinsman of Hygelac,
mighty one, beheld how that maneater
planned to proceed with his sudden assault.

[1] *The glorious king* Or "King of Glory," i.e., God?

Not that the monster[1] meant to delay—
he seized at once at his first pass
a sleeping man, slit him open suddenly,
bit into his joints, drank the blood from his veins,
gobbled his flesh in gobbets, and soon
had completely devoured that dead man,
feet and fingertips. He stepped further,
and took in his hands the strong-hearted
man in his bed; the monster reached out
towards him with his hands—he quickly grabbed him
with evil intent, and sat up against his arm.[2]
As soon as that shepherd of sins discovered
that he had never met on middle-earth,
in any region of the world, another man
with a greater handgrip, in his heart he was
afraid for his life, but none the sooner could he flee.
His mind was eager to escape to the darkness,
seek out a host of devils—his habit there
was nothing like he had ever met before.
The good kinsman of Hygelac remembered then
his evening speech, and stood upright
and seized him fast. His fingers burst;
the giant turned outward, the earl stepped inward.
The notorious one meant—if he might—
to turn away further and flee, away
to his lair in the fen; he knew his fingers
were held in a hostile grip. That was an unhappy
journey
that the harm-doer took to Heorot!
The great hall resounded; to the Danes it seemed,
the city's inhabitants and every brave earl,
like a wild ale-sharing.[3] Both were angry,
fierce house-wardens—the hall echoed.
It was a great wonder that the wine-hall
withstood their fighting and did not fall to the ground,
that fair building—but it was fastened
inside and out with iron bands,
forged with skill. From the floor there flew
many a mead-bench, as men have told me,
gold-adorned, where those grim foes fought.
The Scylding elders had never expected
that any man, by any ordinary means,
could break it apart, beautiful, bone-adorned,
or destroy it with guile, unless the embrace of fire
might swallow it in flames. The noise swelled
new and stark—among the North-Danes was
horrible terror, in each of them
who heard through the wall the wailing cry—
God's adversary shrieked a grisly song
of horror, defeated, the captive of Hell
bewailed his pain. He pinned him fast,
he who was the strongest of might among men
in those days of this life.

12

Not for anything would that protector of earls
let that murderous visitor escape alive—
he did not consider his days on earth
of any use at all. Many an earl
in Beowulf's troop drew his old blade,
longed to protect the life of his liege-lord,
the famous captain, however they could.
But they did not know as they entered the fight,
those stern-minded men of battle,
and thought to strike from all sides
and seek his soul, that no sword,
not the best iron anywhere in the world,
could even touch that evil sinner,
for he had worked a curse on weapons,
every sort of blade. His separation from the world
in those days of this life
would be a wretched work, and that alien spirit
would travel far into the keeping of fiends.
Then he discovered, who had done before
so much harm to the race of mankind,

[1] *monster* The OE word *æglæca*, which literally means "awesome one" or "terror," is elsewhere applied to the dragon-slaying Sigemund (line 893, where it is translated "fierce creature") and to Beowulf himself. Its translation here is admittedly tendentious. The word appears elsewhere, variously translated, in lines 159, 433, 556, 732, etc.

[2] *he quickly grabbed ... his arm* It is not entirely clear who grabs whom—apparently Grendel reaches out to Beowulf, who is lying down; the hero then grabs Grendel's arm and sits up against it.

[3] *wild ale-sharing* The general sense of the OE word *ealuscerwen* is "panic" or "terror," but its precise meaning (probably "a dispensing of ale") is unclear: did the Danes think a wild party was going on?; were they dismayed by the loss of their mead-hall?; or does OE *ealu* mean "luck"?

so many crimes—he was marked by God—
that his body could bear it no longer,
but the courageous kinsman of Hygelac
had him in hand—hateful to each
was the life of the other. The loathsome creature felt
a great pain in his body; a gaping wound opened
in his shoulder-joint, his sinews sprang apart,
his joints burst asunder. Beowulf was given
glory in battle—Grendel was forced
to flee, fatally wounded, into the fen,
seek a sorry abode; he knew quite surely
that the end of his life had arrived,
the sum of his days. The wishes of the Danes
were entirely fulfilled in that bloody onslaught!
He who had come from afar had cleansed,
wise and stout-hearted, the hall of Hrothgar,
warded off attack. He rejoiced in his night-work,
his great deed of courage. That man of the Geats
had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes,
and entirely remedied all their distress,
the insidious sorrows they had suffered
and had to endure from sad necessity,
no small affliction. That was a clear sign
when the battle-brave one laid down the hand,
arm and shoulder—there all together
was Grendel's claw—under the curved roof.

13

Then in the morning was many a warrior,
as I have heard, around that gift-hall,
leaders of the folk came from far and near
throughout the wide land to see that wonder,
the loathsome one's tracks. His parting from life
hardly seemed sad to any man
who examined the trail of that inglorious one,
how he went on his weary way,
defeated by force, to a pool of sea-monsters,
doomed, put to flight, and left a fatal trail.
The water was welling with blood there—
the terrible swirling waves, all mingled together
with hot gore, heaved with the blood of battle,
concealed that doomed one when, deprived of joys,
he lay down his life in his lair in the fen,
his heathen soul—and hell took him.

Then the old retainers returned from there,
and many a youth on the joyful journey,
bravely rode their horses back from the mere,
men on their steeds. There they celebrated
Beowulf's glory: it was often said
that south or north, between the two seas,[1]
across the wide world, there was none
better under the broad billowing sky
among shield-warriors, nor more worthy to rule—
though they found no fault with their own friendly lord,
gracious Hrothgar, but said he was a good king.
At times the proud warriors let their horses prance,
their fallow mares fare in a contest,
wherever the footpaths seemed fair to them,
the way tried and true. At times the king's thane,
full of grand stories, mindful of songs,
who remembered much, a great many
of the old tales, found other words
truly bound together; he began again
to recite with skill the adventure of Beowulf,
adeptly tell an apt tale,
and weave his words. He told nearly all
that he had heard said of Sigemund's
stirring deeds,[2] many strange things,
the Volsung's strife, his distant voyages
obscure, unknown to all the sons of men,
his feuds and crimes—except for Fitela,
when of such things he wished to speak to him,

[1] *between the two seas* A conventional expression like Modern English "coast to coast"; apparently it originally referred to the North and Baltic seas.

[2] *He told... deeds* Beowulf is praised indirectly, by being compared first to Sigemund, another famous monster-slayer (a different version of whose story is told in the Old Norse *Volsungasaga* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*; there the dragon-slaying is attributed to Sigemund's son Siegfried), and then contrasted to Heremod, an earlier king of the Danes who descended into tyranny (it is sometimes assumed that the disastrous ending of Heremod's reign is the cause of the Danes' lordlessness and distress mentioned at the beginning of the poem). The implication is that Beowulf's deeds place him in the ranks of other exemplary figures. The method of narration is allusive and indirect, as though the audience were expected to know the details of the story and appreciate an elliptical reference to them.

uncle to nephew[1]—for always they were,
in every combat, companions at need;
a great many of the race of giants
they slaughtered with their swords. For Sigemund
no small fame grew after his final day,
after that hardened soldier, prince's son,
had killed a dragon, keeper of a hoard;
alone, he dared to go under gray stones,
a bold deed—nor was Fitela by his side;
yet so it befell him that his sword pierced
the wondrous serpent, stood fixed in the wall,
the manly iron; the dragon met his death.
That fierce creature had gone forth in courage
so that he could possess that store of rings
and use them at his will; the son of Wæls
loaded his sea-boat, bore the bright treasure
to the ship's hold. The serpent melted in its own heat.

He was the most famous of exiles, far and wide,
among all people, protector of warriors,
for his noble deeds—he had prospered for them—
since the struggles of Heremod had ceased,
his might and valor. Among the Jutes[2]
he was betrayed into his enemies' hands,
quickly dispatched. The surging of cares
had crippled him too long; he became a deadly burden
to his own people, to all noblemen;
for many a wise man had mourned
in earlier times over his headstrong ways
who had looked to him for relief from affliction,
hoped that that prince's son would prosper,
receive his father's rank, rule his people,
hoard and fortress, a kingdom of heroes,
the Scylding homeland. The kinsman of Hygelac
became to all the race of mankind
a more pleasant friend; sin possessed him.[3]

Sometimes, competing, the fallow paths
they measured on horseback. When morning's light
raced on and hastened away, many a retainer,
stout-hearted, went to see the high hall
to see the strange wonder; the king himself,
guard of the treasure-hoard, strode glorious
from the woman's chambers with a great entourage,
a chosen retinue, and his royal queen with him
measured the mead-hall path with a troop of maidens.

14

Hrothgar spoke—he went to the hall,
stood on the steps, beheld the steep roof
plated with gold, and Grendel's hand:
"For this sight let us swiftly offer thanks
to the Almighty! Much have I endured
of dire grief from Grendel, but God may always
work, Shepherd of glory, wonder upon wonder.
It was not long ago that I did not expect
ever in my life to experience relief
from any of my woes, when, stained with blood,
this best of houses stood dripping, gory,
a widespread woe to all wise men
who did not expect that they might ever
defend the people's fortress from its foes,
devils and demons. Now a retainer has done
the very deed, through the might of God,
which we all could not contrive to do
with all our cleverness. Lo, that woman could say,
whosoever has borne such a son
into the race of men, if she still lives,
that the God of Old was good to her
in childbearing. Now I will cherish you,
Beowulf, best of men, like a son
in my heart; hold well henceforth
your new kinship. You shall have no lack
of any worldly goods which I can bestow.
Often have I offered rewards for less,
honored with gifts a humbler man,
weaker in battle. Now by yourself
you have done such deeds that your fame will endure
always and forever—may the Almighty
reward you with good, as He has already done!"

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"Freely and gladly have we fought this fight,
done this deed of courage, daringly faced

[1] *uncle to nephew* Fitela is actually Sigemund's son by his own sister—either the poet is being discreet, or his version of the story differs from that of the Norse.

[2] *Jutes* Perhaps "Eoten." The word literally means "giants" and may be a tribal name, or an epithet, or may in fact refer to an actual race of giants.

[3] *sin possessed him* I.e., Heremod.

this unknown power. I would much prefer
that you could have seen the foe himself
decked in his finery,[1] fallen and exhausted!
With a hard grip I hoped to bind him
quickly and keenly on the killing floor,
so that in my handgrasp he would have to
lie squirming for life, unless he might slip away;
I could not—the Creator did not wish it—
hinder his going, no matter how hard I held
that deadly enemy; too overwhelming was
that fiend's flight. Yet he forfeited his hand,
his arm and shoulder, to save his life,
to guard his tracks—though he got little
comfort thereby, pathetic creature;
the loathsome destroyer will live no longer,
rotten with sin, but pain has seized him,
grabbed him tightly in its fierce grip,
its baleful bonds—and there he shall abide,
guilty of his crimes, the greater judgment,
how the shining Maker wishes to sentence him."
Then the son of Ecglaf[2] was more silent
in boasting words about his battle-works
after the noblemen, through the earl's skill,
looked on the hand over the high roof,
the enemy's fingers; at the end of each nail
was a sharp tip, most like steel,
heathen talons, the terrible spikes
of that awful warrior; each of them agreed
that not even the hardest of ancient and honorable
irons could touch him, or injure at all
the bloody battle-paw of that baleful creature.

15

Then it was quickly commanded that Heorot
be adorned by hands. There were many
men and women who prepared that wine-hall,
the guest-house; gold-dyed tapestries
shone on the walls, many a wonderful sight
to any man who might look on them.
That shining building was nearly shattered
inside, entirely, fast in its iron bands,
its hinges sprung; the roof alone survived
unharmed, when that horrible creature,
stained with foul deeds, turned in his flight,
despairing of life. Death is not an easy
thing to escape—try it who will—
but compelled by necessity all must come
to that place set aside for soul-bearers,
children of men, dwellers on earth,
where the body, fast on its bed of death,
sleeps after the feast.
Then was the set time
that the son of Healfdene went to the hall;
the king himself wished to share in the feast.
I have never heard of a greater host
who bore themselves better before their treasure-giver.
Those men in their glory moved to their benches,
rejoiced in the feast; fairly those kinsmen
took many a full mead-cup,
stouthearted in the high hall,
Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Heorot within was
filled with friends—no false treacheries
did the people of the Scyldings plot at that time.[3]
He gave to Beowulf the blade of Healfdene,[4]
a golden war-standard as a reward for victory,
the bright banner, a helmet and byrnie,
a great treasure-sword—many saw them
borne before that man. Beowulf received
the full cup in the hall, he felt no shame
at that gift-giving before his bowmen;
never have I heard tell of four treasures
given more graciously, gold-adorned,
from one man to another on the ale-benches.
On the crown of the helmet as a head-protector

[1] *in his finery* Literally "in his adornments," a peculiar phrase since Grendel is notoriously *not* armed and unadorned. Perhaps Beowulf means "covered in a garment of blood"?

[2] *son of Ecglaf* I.e., Unferth.

[3] *Heorot within ... at that time* Implicit in this statement is the idea that, at some later time, the people of the Scyldings *did* plot false treacheries; from other sources it is possible to infer that after the death of Hrothgar, his nephew Hrothulf ruled rather than Hrethric, Hrothgar's son. Many scholars assume that the story of some sort of treacherous usurpation was known to the audience; this gives a special urgency to much of what happens in these scenes of feasting, especially the speeches of Wealhtheow.

[4] *He gave ... Healfdene* The translation follows the reading of Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. The manuscript is usually emended to mean "the son of Healfdene gave to Beowulf."

a ridge, wound with wire, stood without,
so that the file-sharp swords might not terribly
harm him, storm-hardened, when shield-fighters
had to go against hostile forces.
The protector of earls ordered eight horses
with ornamented bridles led into the building,
in under the eaves; on one sat
a saddle, skillfully tooled, set with gemstones;
that was the warseat of the high-king
when the son of Healfdene sought to perform
his swordplay—the widely-known warrior
never failed at the front, when the slain fell about him.
And the lord of the Ingwines[1] gave ownership
of both of them to Beowulf,
the horses and weapons, bid him use them well.
So manfully did the mighty prince,
hoard-guard of warriors, reward the storm of battle
with steeds and treasures that none who will speak
the truth rightfully could ever reproach them.

16

Then the lord of earls, to each of those
on the mead-benches who had made with Beowulf
a sea-journey, gave jeweled treasures,
antique heirlooms, and then ordered
that gold be paid for the man whom Grendel
had wickedly slain—he would have done more,
if wise God and one man's courage
had not prevented that fate. The Maker ruled all
of the race of mankind, as He still does.
Therefore understanding is always best,
spiritual foresight—he must face much,
both love and hate, who long here
endures this world in these days of strife.
Noise and music mingled together
before the leader of Healfdene's forces,
the harp was touched, tales often told,
when Hrothgar's scop was set to recite
among the mead-tables his hall-entertainment
about the sons of Finn, surprised in ambush,
when the hero of the Half-Danes, Hnæf the Scylding,
had to fall in a Frisian slaughter.[2]
Hildeburh, indeed, had no need to praise
the good faith of the Jutes. Guiltless, she was
deprived of her dear ones in that shieldplay,
her sons and brothers—sent forth to their fate,
dispatched by spears; she was a sad lady!
Not without cause did she mourn fate's decrees,
the daughter of Hoc, after daybreak came
and she could see the slaughter of her kin
under the very skies where once she held
the greatest worldly joys. War took away
all of the thanes of Finn, except a few,
so that he could not continue at all
a fight with Hengest on the battlefield,
nor could that woeful remnant drive away
the prince's thane—so they offered them terms:[3]
they would clear out another hall for them,
a house and high-seat, of which they should have
half the control with the sons of the Jutes,
and Folcwalda's son, with feasting and gifts,
should honor the Danes each and every day,
gladden the troops of Hengest with gold rings
and ancient treasures, ornamented gold,
just as often as he would encourage
the hosts of the Frisians in the beer-hall.
They swore their pledges then on either side,
a firm compact of peace. With unfeigned zeal
Finn swore his oaths to Hengest, pledged that he,
with the consent of his counselors, would
support with honor those sad survivors,
and that none should break their pact in word or deed,
nor through malice should ever make mention,
though they should serve their ring-giver's slayer,

[1] *Ingwines* Friends of "Ing"; i.e., the Danes.

[2] *the sons of Finn ... Frisian slaughter* The story is obscure; the survival of a fragment of another poem telling the same story helps clarify the action somewhat. Hnæf, prince of the Danes, is visiting his sister Hildeburh at the home of her husband Finn, king of the Frisians. While there, the Danish party is treacherously attacked (perhaps by a Jutish contingent among Finn's troops, unless the "Jutes" and Frisians are one and the same people); after five days of fighting Hnæf lies dead, along with many casualties on either side. Hnæf's retainer Hengest is left to lead the remnant of Danish survivors.

[3] *them terms* The referent of this pronoun is not entirely clear—who offers what to whom? The terms of the truce are unthinkable—no hero could honorably follow the killer of his lord. In the following line "they" refers to the Frisians, "them" to the Danes.

without a lord, as they were led by need—
and if, provoking, any Frisian spoke
reminding them of all their murderous hate,
then with the sword's edge they should settle it.

The oath[1] was made ready, and ancient gold
was brought from the hoard; the Battle-Scyldings'
best fighting-man was ready for the fire.
It was easy to see upon that pyre
the bloodstained battle-shirt, the gilded swine,
iron-hard boar-images, the noblemen
with fatal wounds—so many felled by war!
Then Hildeburh commanded at Hnæf's pyre
that her own son be consigned to the flames
to be burnt, flesh and bone, placed on the pyre
at his uncle's shoulder; the lady sang
a sad lament. The warrior ascended;
to the clouds coiled the mighty funeral fire,
and roared before their mound; their heads melted,
their gashes burst open and spurted blood,
the deadly body-bites. The flame devoured,
most greedy spirit, those whom war destroyed
of both peoples—their glory departed.

17

The warriors left to seek their native lands,
bereft of friends, to behold Frisia,
their homes and high fortresses. Hengest still
stayed there with Finn that slaughter-stained winter,
unwilling, desolate. He dreamt of home,
though on the frozen sea he could not[2] steer
his ring-prowed ship—the ocean raged with storms,
strove with the wind, and winter locked the waves
in icy bonds, until there came another
year to the courtyard—as it yet does,
always observing its seasons and times,
bright glorious weather. Gone was the winter,
and fair the bosom of earth; the exile burned
to take leave of that court, yet more he thought
of stern vengeance than of sea-voyages,
how he might arrange a hostile meeting,
remind the Jutish sons of his iron sword.
So he did not refuse the world's custom
when the son of Hunlaf[3] placed a glinting sword,
the best of battle-flames, upon his lap;
its edge was not unknown among the Jutes.
And so, in turn, to the bold-minded Finn
befell cruel sword-evil in his own home,
when Guthlaf and Oslaf spoke of their grief,
the fierce attack after their sea voyage,
and cursed their wretched lot—the restless heart
could not restrain itself. The hall was stained
with the lifeblood of foes, and Finn was slain,
the king among his host; the queen was seized.
The Scylding bowmen carried to their ships
all the house property of that earth-king,
whatever they could find in Finn's homestead,
brooches and bright gems. On their sea journey
they bore that noble queen back to the Danes
and led her to her people.

The lay was sung,
the entertainer's song. Glad sounds rose again,
the bench-noise glittered, cupbearers gave
wine from wondrous vessels. Wealhtheow came forth
in her golden crown to where the good two
sat, nephew and uncle; their peace was still whole then,
each true to the other. Likewise Unferth, spokesman,[4]
sat at the foot of the Scylding lord; everyone trusted
his spirit,
that he had great courage, though to his kinsmen he
had not been
merciful in sword-play. Then the lady of the Scyldings
spoke:
"Take this cup, my noble courteous lord,
giver of treasure! Be truly joyful,
gold-friend of men, and speak to the Geats
in mild words, as a man should do!

[1] *oath* Some editors emend *ad* "oath" to *ad* "pyre."

[2] *not* OE *ne* "not" is not in the manuscript; most editors and translators add it to make better sense of the passage and of Hengest's character.

[3] *the son of Hunlaf* It is not clear who this is: perhaps Guthlaf or Oslaf (mentioned a few lines later), perhaps not; apparently some retainers remained with Hengest in Finn's hall, nursing their resentment throughout the winter. Some scholars take the OE word *hunlafing* as the name of a sword.

[4] *spokesman* The Old English word *thyle* has been variously interpreted, from "court jester" to "official speechmaker." The present translation grants Unferth a measure of dignity and position to which, perhaps, he is not entitled.

Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of the gifts
which you now have from near and far.
I have been told that you would take this warrior
for your son. Heorot is cleansed,
the bright ring-hall—use your many rewards
while you can, and leave to your kinsmen
the folk and kingdom, when you must go forth
to face the Maker's decree. I know that my own
dear gracious Hrothulf will hold in honors
these youths, if you should give up the world
before him, friend of the Scyldings;
I expect that he would wish to repay
both our sons kindly, if he recalls all
the pleasures and honors that we have shown him,
in our kindness, since he was a child."
She turned to the bench where her boys sat,
Hrethric and Hrothmund, and the son of heroes,
all the youths together; the good man,
Beowulf the Geat, sat between the two brothers.

18

The flagon was brought forth, a friendly greeting
conveyed with words, and wound gold
offered with good will, two armlets,
garments and rings, and the greatest neck-collar
ever heard of anywhere on earth.
Under heaven I have not heard tell of a better
hoard-treasure of heroes, since Hama carried off
to the bright city the Brosinga necklace,
the gem and its treasures; he fled the treachery
of Eormanric,[1] chose eternal counsel.

Hygelac the Geat on his last journey
had that neck-ring,[2] nephew of Swerting,
when under the banner he defended his booty,
the spoils of slaughter. Fate struck him down
when in his pride he went looking for woe,
a feud with the Frisians. He wore that finery,
those precious stones, over the cup of the sea,
that powerful lord, and collapsed under his shield.
Into Frankish hands came the life of that king,
his breast-garments, and the great collar too;
a lesser warrior looted the corpses
mown down in battle; Geatish men
held that killing field.

The hall swallowed the noise.
Wealhtheow stood before the company and spoke:
"Beowulf, beloved warrior, wear this neck-ring
in good health, and enjoy this war-garment,
treasure of a people, and prosper well,
be bold and clever, and to these boys be
mild in counsel—I will remember you for that.
You have made it so that men will praise you
far and near, forever and ever,
as wide as the seas, home of the winds,
surround the shores of earth. Be while you live
blessed, o nobleman! I wish you well
with these bright treasures. Be to my sons
kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys!
Here each earl is true to the other,
mild in his heart, loyal to his liege-lord,
the thanes united, the nation alert,
the troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid."

She went to her seat. The best of feasts it was—
the men drank wine, and did not know *wyrd*,
the cruel fate which would come to pass
for many an earl once evening came,
and Hrothgar departed to his own dwelling,
the mighty one to his rest. Countless men
held that hall, as they often had before.
They cleared away bench-planks, spread cushions
and bedding on the floor. One of those beer-drinkers
lay down to his rest fated, ripe for death.

[1] *Under heaven ... of Eormanric* The Brosinga necklace had apparently been worn by the Norse goddess Freya. Nothing much is known of Hama, who apparently stole the necklace from Eormanric, famous king of the Goths. The "bright city" and "eternal counsel" may refer to his retreat into a monastery and conversion to Christianity (a story told in the Old Norse *Thidrekssaga*), though this is not entirely certain.

[2] *Hygelac the Geat ... neck-ring* The first of several mentions of Hygelac's ill-fated raid against the Frisians. Later we are told that Beowulf gives the necklace to Hygd, Hygelac's wife; she apparently let him borrow it when he went on his piratical raid.

They set at their heads their round battle-shields,
bright boards; there on the bench,
easily seen over the noblemen,
were the high battle-helmet, the ringed byrnie,
the mighty wooden spear. It was their custom
to be always ready, armed for battle,
at home or in the field, every one of them,
on whatever occasion their overlord
had need of them; that was a good troop.

19

They sank into sleep—one paid sorely
for his evening rest, as had often happened
when Grendel guarded that gold-hall,
committed his wrongs until he came to his end,
died for his sins. It was soon all too clear,
obvious to all men, that an avenger still
lived on after that enemy for a long time
after that grim battle—Grendel's mother,
monstrous woman, remembered her misery,
she who dwelt in those dreadful waters,
the cold streams, ever since Cain
killed with his blade his only brother,
his father's kin; he fled bloodstained,
marked for murder, left the joys of men,
dwelled in the wasteland. From him awoke
many a fateful spirit—Grendel among them,
hateful accursed foe, who found at Heorot
a wakeful warrior waiting for battle.
When the great beast began to seize him,
he remembered his mighty strength,
the ample gifts which God had given him,
and trusted the Almighty for mercy,
favor and support; thus he overcame the fiend,
subdued the hellish spirit. He went away wretched,
deprived of joy, to find his place of death,
mankind's foe. But his mother—greedy,
grim-minded—still wanted to go
on her sad journey to avenge her son's death.

She reached Heorot, where the Ring-Danes
slept throughout the building; a sudden upset
came to men, when Grendel's mother
broke into the hall. The horror was less
by as much as a maiden's strength,
a woman's warfare, is less than an armed man's
when a bloodstained blade, its edges strong,
hammer-forged sword, slices through
the boar-image on a helmet opposite.[1]
Then in the hall was the hard edge drawn,
swords over seats, many a broad shield
raised in hands—none remembered his helmet
or broad mail-shirt when that terror seized them.
She came in haste and meant to hurry out,
save her life, when she was surprised there,
but she quickly seized, fast in her clutches,
one nobleman when she went to the fens.
He was the dearest of heroes to Hrothgar
among his comrades between the two seas,
mighty shield-warrior, whom she snatched from his rest,
a glorious thane. Beowulf was not there,
but another place had been appointed
for the famous Geat after the treasure-giving.
Heorot was in an uproar—she took the famous hand,
covered in gore; care was renewed,
come again to the dwellings. That was no good exchange,
that those on both sides should have to bargain
with the lives of friends.

Then the wise old king,
Grey-bearded warrior, was grieved at heart
when he learned that he no longer lived—
the dearest of men, his chief thane, was dead.
Quickly Beowulf was fetched to the chambers,
victory-blessed man. Just before dawn
that noble champion came with his companions,
went with his men to where the old king waited
wondering whether the Almighty would ever
work a change after his tidings of woe.
Across the floor walked the worthy warrior
with his small troop—the hall-wood resounded—
and with his words he addressed the wise one,
lord of the Ingwines, asked him whether
the night had been agreeable, after his urgent summons.

[1] *The horror ... opposite* In fact Grendel's mother is a much more dangerous opponent for Beowulf; the point of these lines is not clear.

20

Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings:
"Ask not of joys! Sorrow is renewed
for the Danish people. Æschere is dead,
elder brother of Yrmenlaf,
my confidant, my counselor,
my shoulder-companion in every conflict
when we defended our heads when the footsoldiers clashed
and struck boar-helmets. As a nobleman should be,
always excellent, so Æschere was!
In Heorot he was slain by the hand
of a restless death-spirit; I do not know
where that ghoul went, gloating with its carcass,
rejoicing in its feast. She avenged that feud
in which you killed Grendel yesterday evening
in your violent way with a crushing vice-grip,
for he had diminished and destroyed my people
for far too long. He fell in battle,
it cost him his life, and now another has come,
a mighty evil marauder who means to avenge
her kin, and too far has carried out her revenge,
as it may seem to many a thane
whose spirit groans for his treasure-giver,
a hard heart's distress—now that hand lies dead
which was wont to give you all good things.

"I have heard countrymen and hall-counselors
among my people report this:
they have seen two such creatures,
great march-stalkers holding the moors,
alien spirits. The second of them,
as far as they could discern most clearly,
had the shape of a woman; the other, misshapen,
marched the exile's path in the form of a man,
except that he was larger than any other;
in bygone days he was called 'Grendel'
by the local folk. They knew no father,
whether before him had been begotten
any more mysterious spirits. That murky land
they hold, wolf-haunted slopes, windy headlands,
awful fenpaths, where the upland torrents
plunge downward under the dark crags,
the flood underground. It is not far hence
—measured in miles—that the mere stands;
over it hangs a grove hoar-frosted,
a firm-rooted wood looming over the water.
Every night one can see there an awesome wonder,
fire on the water. There lives none so wise
or bold that he can fathom its abyss.
Though the heath-stepper beset by hounds,
the strong-horned hart, might seek the forest,
pursued from afar, he will sooner lose
his life on the shore than save his head
and go in the lake—it is no good place!
The clashing waves climb up from there
dark to the clouds, when the wind drives
the violent storms, until the sky itself droops,
the heavens groan. Now once again all help
depends on you alone. You do not yet know
this fearful place, where you might find
the sinful creature—seek it if you dare!
I will reward you with ancient riches
for that feud, as I did before,
with twisted gold, if you return alive."

21

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"Sorrow not, wise one! It is always better
to avenge one's friend than to mourn overmuch.
Each of us must await the end
of this world's life; let him who can
bring about fame before death—that is best
for the unliving man after he is gone.
Arise, kingdom's guard, let us quickly go
and inspect the path of Grendel's kin.
I promise you this: he[1] will find no protection—
not in the belly of the earth nor the bottom of the sea,
nor the mountain groves—let him go where he will!
For today, you must endure patiently
all your woes, as I expect you will."
The old man leapt up, thanked the Lord,
the mighty God, for that man's speech.

Then for Hrothgar a horse was bridled
with plaited mane. The wise prince

[1] *he* The hero does not note carefully enough the gender of Grendel's mother, or else the pronoun *he* refers to OE *magan* "kinsman," a masculine noun.

rode in full array; footsoldiers marched
with shields at the ready. The tracks were seen
far and wide on the forest paths,
a trail through the woods, where she went forth
over the murky moor, bore the young man's
lifeless body, the best of all those
who had held watch over Hrothgar's home.
The son of nobles crossed over
the steep stone cliffs, the constricted climb,
a narrow solitary path, a course unknown,
the towering headlands, home of sea-monsters.
He went before with just a few
wise men to see the way,
until suddenly he saw mountain-trees,
stunted and leaning over gray stone,
a joyless wood; the water went under
turbid and dreary. To all the Danes,
the men of the Scyldings, many a thane,
it was a sore pain at heart to suffer,
a grief to every earl, when on the seacliff
they came upon the head of Æschere.
The flood boiled with blood—the folk gazed on—
and hot gore. At times a horn sang
its eager war-song. The footsoldiers sat down.
They saw in the water many kinds of serpents,
strange sea-creatures testing the currents,
and on the sloping shores lay such monsters
as often attend in early morning
a sorrowful journey on the sail-road,
dragons and wild beasts. They rushed away
bitter, enraged; they heard the bright noise,
the sound of the battle-horn. A Geatish bowman
cut short the life of one of those swimmers
with a bow and arrow, so that in his body stood
the hard war-shaft; he was a slower swimmer
on the waves, when death took him away.
At once in the water he was assailed
with the barbed hooks of boar-pikes,
violently attacked and dragged ashore,
the strange wave-roamer; the men inspected
this grisly visitor.

Beowulf geared up
in his warrior's clothing, cared not for his life.
The broad war-shirt, woven by hand,
cunningly made, had to test the mere—
it knew well how to protect his bone-house
so that a battle-grip might not hurt his breast
nor an angry malicious clutch touch his life.
The shining helmet protected his head,
set to stir up the sea's depths,
seek that troubled water, decorated with treasure,
encircled with a splendid band, as a weapon-smith
in days of old had crafted it with wonders,
set boar-images, so that afterwards
no blade or battle-sword might ever bite it.
Not the smallest of powerful supports was that
which Hrothgar's spokesman lent him at need;
that hilted sword was named Hrunting,
unique among ancient treasures—
its edge was iron, etched with poison stripes,
hardened with the blood of war; it had never failed
any man who grasped it in his hands in battle,
who dared to undertake a dreadful journey
into the very home of the foe—it was not the first time
that it had to perform a work of high courage.
Truly, the son of Ecglaf, crafty in strength,
did not remember what he had said before,
drunk with wine, when he lent that weapon
to a better swordsman; he himself did not dare
to risk his life under the rushing waves,
perform a lordly act; for that he lost honor,
his fame for courage. Not so with the other,
when he had geared himself up for battle.

22

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"Consider now, famous kinsman of Healfdene,
wise prince, now that I am eager to depart,
gold-friend to men, what we spoke of before:
if ever in your service I should
lose my life, that you would always be
like a father to me when I have gone forth.
Be a protector to my band of men,
my boon-companions, if battle should take me,
beloved Hrothgar, and send on to Hygelac
the gifts of treasure which you have given me.
The lord of the Geats will understand by that gold,
the son of Hrethel will see by that treasure,

that I found a ring-giver who was good
in ancient customs, and while I could, enjoyed it.
And let Unferth have that ancient heirloom,
that well-known man have my wave-patterned sword,
hard-edged, splendid; with Hrunting I shall
win honor and fame, or death will take me!"

After these words the Wether-Geat man
hastened boldly, by no means wished to
stay for an answer; the surging sea received
the brave soldier. It was the space of a day[1]
before he could perceive the bottom.
Right away she who held that expanse of water,
bloodthirsty and fierce, for a hundred half-years,
grim and greedy, perceived that some man
was exploring from above that alien land.
She snatched at him, seized the warrior
in her savage clutches, but none the sooner
injured his sound body—the ring-mail encircled him,
so that she could not pierce that war-dress,
the locked coat of mail, with her hostile claws.
Then that she-wolf of the sea swam to the bottom,
and bore the prince of rings into her abode,
so that he might not—no matter how strong—
wield his weapons, but so many wonders
set upon him in the water, many a sea-beast
with battle-tusks tearing at his war-shirt,
monsters pursuing him.[2]

Then the earl perceived
that he was in some sort of battle-hall
where no water could harm him in any way,
and, for the hall's roof, he could not be reached
by the flood's sudden rush—he saw a fire-light,
a glowing blaze shining brightly.
Then the worthy man saw that water-witch,
a great mere-wife; he gave a mighty blow
with his battle-sword—he did not temper that stroke—
so that the ring-etched blade rang out on her head
a greedy battle-song. The guest discovered then
that the battle-flame would not bite,
or wound her fatally—but the edge failed
the man in his need; it had endured many
hand-to-hand meetings, often sheared through helmets,
fated war-garments. It was the first time
that the fame of that precious treasure had failed.

Again he was stalwart, not slow of zeal,
mindful of glory, that kinsman of Hygelac—
the angry challenger threw away that etched blade,
wrapped and ornamented, so that it lay on the earth,
strong, steel-edged. He trusted his strength,
the might of his handgrip—as a man should do
if by his warfare he thinks to win
long-lasting praise: he cares nothing for his life.
The man of the War-Geats grabbed by the shoulder
Grendel's mother—he had no regret for that feud;
battle-hardened, enraged, he swung her around,
his deadly foe, so she fell to the ground.
Quickly she gave him requital for that
with a grim grasp, and grappled him to her—
weary, he stumbled, strongest of warriors,
of foot-soldiers, and took a fall.
She set upon her hall-guest[3] and drew her knife,
broad, bright-edged; she would avenge her boy,
her only offspring. On his shoulders lay
the linked corselet; it defended his life,
prevented the entrance of point and blade.
There the son of Ecgtheow would have ended his life
under the wide ground, the Geatish champion,
had not his armored shirt offered him help,
the hard battle-net, and holy God
brought about war-victory—the wise Lord,
Ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly,
easily, once he stood up again.

23

He saw among the armor a victorious blade,
ancient giant-sword strong in its edges,
worthy in battles; it was the best of weapons,
except that it was greater than any other man
might even bear into the play of battle,
good, adorned, the work of giants.[4]

[1] *It was the space of a day* Or "it was daylight."

[2] *pursuing him* Or "attacked their adversary." The Old English word *eglæcan* may refer here to Beowulf or the sea-monsters.

[3] *She set upon her hall-guest* Some translations read "sat down upon"; the meaning of OE *ofsæt* is disputed.

[4] *the work of giants* Old, highly praised weapons are often called "the work of giants"—whether this is meant to connect the sword to the giants "who fought against God" is not clear.

The Scyldings' champion seized its linked hilt,
fierce and ferocious, drew the ring-marked sword
despairing of his life, struck in fury
so that it caught her hard in the neck,
broke her bone-rings; the blade cut through
the doomed flesh—she fell to the floor,
the sword was bloody, the soldier rejoiced.
The flames gleamed, a light glowed within
even as from heaven the firmament's candle
shines clearly. He looked around the chamber,
passed by the wall, hefted the weapon
hard by its hilt, that thane of Hygelac,
angry and resolute—nor was the edge useless
to that warrior, but he quickly wished
to pay back Grendel for the many battle-storms
which he had wrought on the West-Danes
much more often than on one occasion,
when Hrothgar's hall-companions
he slew in their beds, devoured sleeping
fifteen men of the Danish folk,
and made off with as many more,
a loathsome booty. He paid him back for that,
the fierce champion, for on a couch he saw
Grendel lying lifeless,
battle-weary from the wound he received
in the combat at Heorot. His corpse burst open
when he was dealt a blow after death,
a hard sword-stroke, and his head chopped off.
Soon the wise troops saw it,
those who kept watch on the water with Hrothgar—
all turbid were the waves, and troubled,
the sea stained with blood. The graybearded
elders spoke together about the good one,
said they did not expect that nobleman
would return, triumphant, to seek
the mighty prince; to many it seemed
that the sea-wolf had destroyed him.
The ninth hour came; the noble Scyldings
abandoned the headland, and home went
the gold-friend of men. The guests[1] sat
sick at heart, and stared into the mere;
they wished, but did not hope, that they would
see their lord himself.
Then the sword began,
that blade, to dissolve away in battle-icicles
from the war-blood; it was a great wonder
that it melted entirely, just like ice
when the Father loosens the frost's fetters,
unwraps the water's bonds—He wields power
over times and seasons; that is the true Maker.
The man of the Geats took no more precious treasures
from that place—though he saw many there—
than the head, and the hilt as well,
bright with gems; the blade had melted,
the ornamented sword burned up; so hot was the blood
of the poisonous alien spirit who died in there.
Soon he was swimming who had survived in battle
the downfall of his enemies, dove up through the water;
the sea-currents were entirely cleansed,
the spacious regions, when that alien spirit
gave up life-days and this loaned world.
The defender of seafarers came to land,
swam stout-hearted; he rejoiced in his sea-booty,
the great burden which he brought with him.
That splendid troop of thanes went towards him,
thanked God, rejoiced in their prince,
that they might see him safe and sound.
Then from that bold man helmet and byrnie
were quickly unstrapped. Under the clouds
the mere stewed, stained with gore.
They went forth, followed the trail,
rejoicing in their hearts; they marched along the road,
the familiar path; proud as kings
they carried the head from the sea-cliff
with great trouble, even for two pairs
of stout-hearted men; four of them had to
bear, with some strain, on a battle-pole
Grendel's head to the gold-hall,
until presently fourteen proud
and battle-hardy Geats came to the hall,
warriors marching; the lord of those men,
mighty in the throng, trod the meadhall-plain.
Then the ruler of thanes entered there,
daring in actions, honored in fame,
battle-brave hero, to greet Hrothgar.
Then, where men were drinking, they dragged by its hair
Grendel's head across the hall-floor,
a grisly spectacle for the men and the queen.
Everyone stared at that amazing sight.

[1] *The guests* I.e., the Geats who had come to Heorot with Beowulf.

24

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"Look! son of Healfdene, prince of the Scyldings,
we have brought you gladly these gifts from the sea
which you gaze on here, a token of glory.
Not easily did I escape with my life
that undersea battle, did my brave deed
with difficulty—indeed, the battle would have been
over at once, if God had not guarded me.
Nor could I achieve anything at that battle
with Hrunting, though that weapon is good;
but the Ruler of Men granted to me
that I might see on the wall a gigantic old sword,
hanging glittering—He has always guided
the friendless one—so I drew that weapon.
In that conflict, when I had the chance, I slew
the shepherds of that house. Then that battle-sword
burned up with its ornaments, as the blood shot out,
hot sweat of battle. I have brought the hilt
back from the enemy; I avenged the old deeds,
the slaughter of Danes, as seemed only right.
Now you have my word that you may in Heorot
sleep without care with your company of men,
and every thane, young and old,
in your nation; you need fear nothing,
prince of the Scyldings, from that side,
no deadly manslaughters, as you did before."
Then the golden hilt was placed in the hand
of the gray-haired war-chief, wise old leader,
that old work of giants; it came to the keeping
of the Danish lord after the fall of demons,
a work of wonder-smiths; and when that evil-hearted
man,
God's adversary, gave up the world,
guilty of murders—and his mother too—
it passed to the possession of the best
of world-kings between the two seas,
of all those that dealt out treasures in Danish lands.
Hrothgar spoke—he studied the hilt
of the old heirloom, where was written[1] the origin
of ancient strife, when the flood slew,
rushing seas, the race of giants—
they suffered awfully. That was a people alien
to the eternal Lord; a last reward
the Ruler gave them through the raging waters.
Also, on the sword-guard of bright gold
was rightly marked in rune-letters,
set down and said for whom that sword,
best of irons, had first been made,
with scrollery and serpentine patterns. Then spoke
the wise son of Healfdene—all fell silent:
"One may, indeed, say, if he acts in truth
and right for the people, remembers all,
old guardian of his homeland, that this earl was
born a better man! Beowulf my friend,
your glory is exalted throughout the world,
over every people; you hold it all with patient care,
and temper strength with wisdom. To you I shall fulfill
our friendship, as we have said. You shall become a
comfort
everlasting to your own people,
and a help to heroes.
"Not so was Heremod
to the sons of Ecgwala, the Honor-Scyldings;
he grew not for their delight, but for their destruction
and the murder of Danish men.
Enraged, he cut down his table-companions,
comrades-in-arms, until he turned away alone
from the pleasures of men, that famous prince;
though mighty God exalted him in the joys
of strength and force, advanced him far
over all men, yet in his heart he nursed
a blood-ravenous breast-hoard. No rings did he give
to the Danes for their honor; he endured, joyless,
to suffer the pains of that strife,
a long-lasting harm to his people. Learn from him,
understand virtue! For your sake I am telling this,
in the wisdom of my winters.
"It is a wonder to say
how mighty God in His great spirit
allots wisdom, land and lordship
to mankind; He has control of everything.
At times He permits the thoughts of a man
in a mighty race to move in delights,
gives him to hold in his homeland
the sweet joys of earth, a stronghold of men,
grants him such power over his portion of the world,

[1] *written* Or "carved." It is not clear whether the scene is visual or textual, depicted or written in (presumably runic) characters.

a great kingdom, that he himself cannot
imagine an end to it, in his folly.
He dwells in plenty; in no way plague him
illness or old age, nor do evil thoughts
darken his spirit, nor any strife
or sword—hate shows itself, but all the world
turns to his will; he knows nothing worse.

25

"At last his portion of pride within him
grows and flourishes, while the guardian sleeps,
the soul's shepherd—that sleep is too sound,
bound with cares, the slayer too close
who, sinful and wicked, shoots from his bow.[1]
Then he is struck in his heart, under his helmet
with a bitter dart—he knows no defense—
the strange, dark demands of evil spirits;
what he has long held seems too little,
angry and greedy, he gives no golden rings
for vaunting boasts, and his final destiny
he neglects and forgets, since God, Ruler of glories,
has given him a portion of honors.
In the end it finally comes about
that the loaned life-dwelling starts to decay
and falls, fated to die; another follows him
who doles out his riches without regret,
the earl's ancient treasure; he heeds no terror.
Defend yourself from wickedness, dear Beowulf,
best of men, and choose better,
eternal counsel; care not for pride,
great champion! The glory of your might
is but a little while; too soon it will be
that sickness or the sword will shatter your strength,
or the grip of fire, or the surging flood,
or the cut of a sword, or the flight of a spear,
or terrible old age—or the light of your eyes
will fail and flicker out; in one fell swoop
death, o warrior, will overwhelm you.
"Thus, a hundred half-years I held the Ring-Danes
under the skies, and kept them safe from war
from many tribes throughout this middle-earth,
from spears and swords, so that I considered none
under the expanse of heaven my enemy.
Look! Turnabout came in my own homeland,
grief after gladness, when Grendel became
my invader, ancient adversary;
for that persecution I bore perpetually
the greatest heart-cares. Thanks be to the Creator,
eternal Lord, that I have lived long enough
to see that head, stained with blood,
with my own eyes, after all this strife!
Go to your seat, enjoy the feast,
honored in battle; between us shall be shared
a great many treasures, when morning comes."
Glad-hearted, the Geat went at once
to take his seat, as the wise one told him.
Then again as before, a feast was prepared
for the brave ones who occupied the hall
on this new occasion. The dark helm of night
overshadowed the troop. The soldiers arose;
the gray-haired ruler was ready for bed,
the aged Scylding. Immeasurably well
did rest please the Geat, proud shield-warrior;
at once a chamberlain led him forth,
weary from his adventure, come from afar,
he who attended to all the needs
of that thane, for courtesy, as in those days
all heroes and warriors used to have.
The great-hearted one rested; the hall towered
vaulted and gold-adorned; the guest slept within
until the black[2] raven, blithe-hearted, announced
the joy of heaven. Then light came hurrying
bright over shadows; the soldiers hastened,
the noblemen were eager to travel
back to their people; the bold-spirited visitor
wished to seek his far-off ship.
The hardy one ordered Hrunting to be borne
to the son of Ecglaf,[3] bid him take his sword,
lordly iron; he thanked him for the loan,
and said that he regarded it as a good war-friend,
skillful in battle, and the sword's edges

[1] *At last ... bow* The slayer is sin or vice; the soul's guardian is reason, conscience, or prudence.

[2] *black* Either OE *blac* "shining" or *blæc* "black"; the translation prefers the irony of the image of the black raven, not otherwise known as a harbinger of joy, announcing the surprising good news of a dawn without slaughter.

[3] *son of Ecglaf* I.e., Unferth.

he did not disparage; he was a noble man.
And when the warriors were eager for their journey,
equipped in their war-gear, the nobleman went,
honoring the Danes, to the high seat where the other was:
the hero, brave in battle, saluted Hrothgar.

26

Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"Now we seafarers, come from afar,
wish to say that we desire
to seek Hygelac. Here we were honorably
entertained with delights; you have treated us well.
If ever on earth I can do any thing
to earn more of your affection,
than the battle-deeds I have done already,
ruler of men, I will be ready at once.
If ever I hear over the sea's expanse
that your neighbors threaten you with terror
as your enemies used to do,
I will bring you a thousand thanes,
heroes to help you. I have faith in Hygelac—
the lord of the Geats, though he be young,
shepherd of his people, will support me
with words and deeds, that I might honor you well
and bring to your side a forest of spears,
the support of my might, whenever you need men.
If ever Hrethric, son of a prince, decides
to come to the Geatish court, he will find
many friends there; far-off lands
are better sought by one who is himself good."
Hrothgar spoke in answer to him:
"The wise Lord has sent those words
into your heart; I have never heard
a shrewder speech from such a young man.
You are strong in might, and sound in mind,
prudent in speech! I expect it is likely
that if it should ever happen that the spear
or the horrors of war take Hrethel's son,[1]
or sickness or sword strike the shepherd of his people,
your lord, and you still live,
that the sea-Geats could not select
a better choice anywhere for king,
hoard-guard of heroes, if you will hold
the realm of your kinsmen. Your character pleases me
better and better, beloved Beowulf.
You have brought it about that between our peoples,
the Geatish nation and the spear-Danes,
there shall be peace, and strife shall rest,
the malicious deeds they endured before,
as long as I shall rule this wide realm,
and treasures together. Many shall greet
another with gifts across the gannet's bath;
the ring-necked ship shall bring over the sea
tribute and tokens of love. I know these nations
will be made fast against friend and foe,
blameless in everything, in the old way."
The protector of heroes, kinsman of Healfdene,
gave him twelve great treasures in the hall;
bid him seek his own dear people in safety
with those gifts, and quickly come again.
Then the good king, of noble kin, kissed
that best of thanes and embraced his neck,
the Scylding prince; tears were shed
by that gray-haired man. He was of two minds—
but in his old wisdom knew it was more likely
that never again would they see one another,
brave in their meeting-place. The man was so dear
to him
that he could not hold back the flood in his breast,
but in his heart, fast in the bonds of his thought,
a deep-felt longing for the dear man
burned in his blood. Beowulf from thence,
gold-proud warrior, trod the grassy lawn,
exulting in treasure; the sea-goer awaited
its lord and owner, where it rode at anchor.
As they were going, the gift of Hrothgar
was often praised; that king was peerless,
blameless in everything, until old age took from him
—it has injured so many—the joy of his strength.

27

Those men of high courage then came to the sea,
that troop of young retainers, bore their ring-mail,
locked shirts of armor. The coast-guard observed
the return of those earls, as he had once before;

[1] *Hrethel's son* I.e., Hygelac.

he did not greet those guests with insults
on the clifftop, but rode towards them,
said that the warriors in their shining armor
would be welcome in their ships to the people of
the Weders.
The sea-curved prow, the ring-necked ship,
as it lay on the sand was laden with war-gear,
with horses and treasures; the mast towered high
over Hrothgar's hoard-gifts.
To the ship's guardian he[1] gave a sword,
bound with gold, so that on the mead-benches
he was afterwards more honored by that heirloom,
that old treasure. Onward they went, the ship
sliced through deep water, gave up the Danish coast.
The sail by the mast was rigged fast with ropes,
a great sea-cloth; the timbers creaked,
the wind over the sea did not hinder at all
the wave-floater on its way; the sea-goer sped on,
floated foamy-necked, forth upon the waves,
the bound prow over the briny streams,
until they could make out the cliffs of Geatland,
familiar capes; the keel drove forward
thrust by the wind, and came to rest on land.
Right away the harbor-guard was ready at the shore,
who for a long time had gazed far
over the currents, eager for the beloved men;
he moored the broad-beamed ship on the beach
fast with anchor-ropes, lest the force of the waves
should drive away the handsome wooden vessel.
He bade that the nobleman's wealth be borne ashore,
armor and plated gold; they had not far to go
to seek their dispenser of treasure,
Hygelac son of Hrethel, where he dwelt at home
with his companions, near the sea-wall.
The building was splendid, the king quite bold,
high in his hall, Hygd[2] very young,
wise, well-mannered, though few winters
had the daughter of Hæreth passed within
the palace walls—yet not poor for that,
nor stingy of gifts to the Geatish people,
of great treasures. She considered Thryth's pride,[3]
famous folk-queen, and her terrible crimes:
no man, however bold, among her own retainers
dared to approach her, except as her prince,[4]
or dared to look into her eyes by day;
for he knew that deadly bonds, braided by hand,
were waiting for him—first the hand-grip,
and quickly after a blade appointed,
so that a patterned sword had to settle things,
proclaim the execution. That is no queenly custom
for a lady to perform—no matter how lovely—
that a peace-weaver[5] should deprive of life
a friendly man after a pretended affront.
The kinsman of Hemming[6] put a halt to that:
then ale-drinkers told another tale,
said she caused less calamity to the people,
less malicious evil, after she was
given gold-adorned to the young champion,
fair to that nobleman, when to Offa's floor
she sought a journey over the fallow sea
at her father's wish, where she afterwards
on the throne, famous for good things,
used well her life while she had it,
held high love with that chief of heroes,
of all mankind, as men have told me,
the best between the two seas,
of all the races of men; therefore Offa,
in gifts and battle, spear-bold man,
was widely honored, and held in wisdom
his own homeland. From him arose Eomer

[1] *he* I.e., Beowulf.

[2] *Hygd* Hygelac's queen.

[3] *Thryth's pride* These lines are difficult. Some editions and translations read the name as "Modthryth"; the reading adopted here smoothes out a transition that is otherwise abrupt even by the standards of this poem. This "digression" on the character of a queen, with some elements of a folktale, is the counterpart to the story of Heremod in earlier sections.

[4] *her prince* I.e., as a husband; or else the line means "except the prince himself," i.e., her father.

[5] *peace-weaver* This epithet reflects the common practice, whose sometimes tragic consequences are explored at length elsewhere in the poem, of settling intertribal feuds with a marriage between the daughter of one lord and the son of another.

[6] *kinsman of Hemming* Offa I, fourth-century king of the continental Angles, not Offa II, the eighth-century king of Mercia. The elaborate praise offered to Offa I has been taken to suggest that the poem may have been written or circulated in the court of Offa II, but there is otherwise no evidence for this.

as a help to heroes, kinsman of Hemming,
grandson of Garmund, skilled in violence.

28

The hardy man[1] with his hand-picked troop
went across the sand, trod the sea-plain,
the wide shore. The world's candle shone,
hastening from the south. They had survived their
journey,
went boldly to where they knew
the protector of earls, slayer of Ongentheow,[2]
good young battle-king, gave out rings
in his fortress. To Hygelac
the arrival of Beowulf was quickly reported,
that to the enclosures his battle-companion,
protector of warriors, came walking alive
back to his court, safe from his battle-play.
Quickly, as the powerful one commanded,
the hall was cleared out inside for the foot-guests.
He sat down with him, he who had survived the
fight,
kinsmen together, after he greeted
his friend and liege-lord with a formal speech,
with courteous words and cups of mead.
The daughter of Hæreth passed through the hall,
cared for the people, bore the cup
to the hand of the hero.[3] Hygelac began
to question his companion courteously
in the high hall—curiosity pressed him
to know how the sea-Geats' adventures had gone:
"How did you fare, beloved Beowulf,
in your journey, when you suddenly resolved
to seek a far-off strife over the salt sea,
a battle in Heorot? Did you better at all
the well-known woe of Hrothgar,
the famous prince? For that I seethed
with heart-care and distress, mistrusted the adventure
of my beloved man; long I implored
that you not seek that slaughter-spirit at all,
let the south-Danes themselves make
war against Grendel. I say thanks to God
that I might see you again safe and sound."
Beowulf spoke, son of Ecgtheow:
"It is no mystery to many men,
my lord Hygelac—the great meeting,
what a time of great struggle Grendel and I
had in that place where he made so many
sorrows for the victory-Scyldings,
life-long misery—I avenged them all,
so that none of Grendel's tribe needs to boast
anywhere on earth of that uproar at dawn,
whoever lives longest of that loathsome kind,
enveloped in foul evil. First I came there
to the ring-hall to greet Hrothgar;
quickly the famous kinsman of Healfdene,
once he knew of my intentions,
assigned me a seat with his own sons.
That troop was in delight; never in my life
have I seen among hall-sitters, under heaven's vault,
a more joyous feast. At times the famous queen,
bond of peace to nations, passed through the hall,
urged on her young sons; often she gave
twisted rings before she took her seat.
At times before the hall-thanes the daughter of Hrothgar
bore the ale-cup to the earls in the back—
Freawaru, I heard the men in the hall
call her, when the studded treasure-cup
was passed among them. She is promised,
young, gold-adorned, to the gracious son of Froda;[4]
the ruler of the Scyldings has arranged this,
the kingdom's shepherd, and approves the counsel
that he might settle his share of feud and slaughter
with this young woman. But seldom anywhere
after the death of a prince does the deadly spear rest
for even a brief while, though the bride be good!
"It may, perhaps, displease the Heathobards' prince,
and every retainer among his tribe,

[1] *The hardy man* I.e., Beowulf.

[2] *slayer of Ongentheow* I.e., Hygelac. The death of the Swedish king Ongentheow (at the hands of Wulf and Eofor, retainers of Hygelac) is told below, section 40.

[3] *to the hand of the hero* The manuscript reads "to the hands of heathens," which makes sense, but is usually emended. The "daughter of Hæreth" is Hygd.

[4] *the gracious son of Froda* Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards. His attack on the Danes, alluded to earlier in the poem (80–85), was apparently unsuccessful; another Old English poem, *Widsith* reports that "Hrothulf and Hrothgar ... humbled Ingeld's battle-array."

when across the floor, following that woman, goes
a noble son of the Danes, received with honors;
on him glitters an ancestral heirloom,
hard, ring-adorned, once a Heathobard treasure
as long as they were able to wield their weapons—

29

until in that deadly shield-play they undid
their beloved comrades and their own lives.
Then an old spear-bearer[1] speaks over his beer,
who sees that ring-hilt and remembers all
the spear-deaths of men—his spirit is grim—
begins, sad-minded, to test the mettle
of a young thane with his innermost thoughts,
to awaken war, and says these words:

"'Can you, my friend, recognize that sword,
which your father bore into battle
in his final adventure beneath the helmet,
that dear iron, when the Danes struck him,
ruled the field of slaughter after the rout of heroes,
when Withergyld[2] fell—those valiant Scyldings?
Now here some son or other of his slayer
walks across this floor, struts in his finery,
brags of the murder and bears that treasure
which ought, by right, to belong to you.'

"He urges and reminds him on every occasion
with cruel words, until the time comes
that Freawaru's thane, for his father's deeds,
sleeps, bloodstained from the bite of a sword,
forfeits his life; from there the other
escapes alive, for he knows the land well.
Then on both sides the sworn oaths of earls
will be broken, once bitter violent hate
wells up in Ingeld, and his wife-love
grows cooler after his surging cares.
Thus I expect that the Heathobards' part
in the Danish alliance is not without deceit,
nor their friendship fast.

"I will speak further
concerning Grendel, so that you might certainly know,
giver of treasure, how it turned out,
the heroic wrestling-match. When heaven's gem
slipped under the ground, the angry spirit came,
horrible, evening-grim, sought us out
where, unharmed, we guarded the hall.
The attack came first against Hondscio[3] there,
deadly to that doomed man—he fell first,
a girded champion; Grendel was
that famous young retainer's devourer,
gobbled up the body of that beloved man.
None the sooner did that slayer, blood in his teeth,
mindful of misery, mean to leave
that gold-hall empty-handed,
but in his mighty strength he tested me,
grabbed with a ready hand. A glove[4] hung
huge, grotesque, fast with cunning clasps;
it was all embroidered with evil skill,
with the devil's craft and dragons' skins.
Inside there, though I was innocent,
that proud evil-doer wanted to put me,
one of many; but it was not to be,
once I angrily stood upright.

30[5]

"It is too long to tell how I handed back payment
to the people's enemy for all his evils—
there, my prince, I did honor to your people
with my actions. He escaped away,
enjoyed his life a little while longer;
yet behind him, guarding his path, was his right
hand in Heorot, and wretched, he went hence,
sad at heart, and sank to the sea-floor.

[1] *an old spear-bearer* I.e., of the Heathobards, outraged by the presence of his former enemies, the Danes. In heroic poetry when a warrior falls, his killer is often awarded his armor; the sword is a vivid reminder of the fate of its former owner and the duty of revenge that is passed on to the next generation.

[2] *Withergyld* Apparently a famous Heathobard warrior.

[3] *Hondscio* We finally learn the name of the retainer killed in section 11. The name, as in modern German, means "glove."

[4] *glove* It is not clear what this is, but apparently it is a pouch of some kind. It is characteristic of a troll in Norse legend. In any case it does not figure in the narrator's own description of Grendel's attack, and is but one of the discrepancies between the two tellings of the story. Is Beowulf embellishing his tale? Or do such inconsistencies matter in a story like this?

[5] *30* The placement of this section is conjectural; the MS sectional divisions are confused at this point.

"For that bloody onslaught the friend of the Scyldings
repaid me greatly with plated gold,
many treasures, when morning came,
and we had gathered together to the feast again.
There was song and joy; the aged Scylding,[1]
widely learned, told of far-off times;
at times the brave warrior touched the song-wood,
delight of the harp, at times made lays
both true and sad, at times strange stories
he recounted rightly. That great-hearted king,
gray-bearded old warrior wrapped in his years,
at times began to speak of his youth again,
his battle-strength; his heart surged within him
when, old in winters, he remembered so much.
And so there inside we took our ease
all day long, until night descended
again upon men. There, quickly ready
with revenge for her griefs, Grendel's mother
journeyed sorrowful; death took her son,
the war-hate of the Weders. That monstrous woman
avenged her son, killed a soldier
boldly at once—there the life of Æschere,
wise old counselor, came to its end.
And when morning came the men of the Danes
were not able to burn his death-weary body
with flames, nor place him on a funeral pyre,
beloved man; she bore away his corpse
in her evil embrace under the upland streams.
That, to Hrothgar, was the most wrenching distress
of all those that had befallen that folk-leader.
Then the prince—by your life—implored me,
his mind wracked, that in the roaring waves
I should do a noble deed, put my life in danger,
perform glorious things—he promised me reward.
In the waves I found, as is widely known,
a grim, horrible guardian of the abyss.
There for a while, we fought hand-to-hand;
the sea foamed with blood, and I severed the head
of Grendel's mother with a mighty sword
in that [battle-]hall;[2] I barely managed
to get away with my life—I wasn't doomed yet—
and the protector of earls once again gave me
many treasures, that kinsman of Healfdene.

31

"So that nation's king followed good customs;
in no wise have I lost those rewards,
the prize for my strength, but the son of Healfdene
offered me treasures at my own choice,
which I wish to bring to you, o war-king,
to show good will. Still all my joys
are fixed on you alone; I have few
close kinsmen, my Hygelac, except for you."
He ordered to be borne in the boar standard,
the helmet towering in battle, the gray byrnie,
the decorated sword, and told this story:
"Hrothgar gave me this battle-gear,
wise prince, and commanded particularly
that first I should tell you the story of his gift—
he said that Heorogar[3] the king first had it,
lord of the Scyldings, for a long while;
none the sooner would he give to his own son,
the valiant Heoroweard—loyal though he was—
that breast-armor. Use all well!"
Then, as I've heard, four swift horses,
fallow as apples, well-matched, followed
that war-gear; he gave him as a gift
the horses and harness—as kinsman should behave,
never knitting a net of malice for another
with secret plots, preparing death
for his hand-picked comrades. Hygelac's nephew
was loyal to him, hardy in the fight,
and each man to the other mindful of benefits.—
I heard that he gave the necklace to Hygd,
the wondrous ornamented treasure which
Wealhtheow had given him,
to that lord's daughter, along with three horses
graceful and saddle-bright; her breast was adorned
the more graciously after that ring-giving.
So the son of Ecgtheow showed himself brave,
renowned for battles and noble deeds,
pursued honor, by no means slew, drunken,

[1] *the friend of the Scyldings … Scylding* It is not clear whether this is Hrothgar or not, or how many storytellers and singers are at this banquet.

[2] *[battle-]hall* A word is missing; other editors and translators supply different words, such as *grund* or "earth."

[3] *Heorogar* I.e., the eldest brother of Hrothgar.

his hearth-companions; he had no savage heart,
but the great gift which God had given him,
the greatest might of all mankind, he held,
brave in battle. He had been long despised,[1]
as the sons of the Geats considered him no good,
nor did the lord of the Weders wish to bestow
many good things upon him on the mead-benches,
for they assumed that he was slothful,
a cowardly nobleman. Reversal came
to the glorious man for all his griefs.

The protector of earls, battle-proud king,
ordered the heirloom of Hrethel[2] brought in,
adorned with gold; among the Geats there was
no finer treasure in the form of a sword.
He laid the sword in Beowulf's lap,
and gave him seven thousand hides of land,[3]
a hall and a princely throne. Both of them held
inherited land in that nation, a home
and native rights, but the wider rule
was reserved to the one who was higher in rank.

Then it came to pass[4] amid the crash of battle
in later days, after Hygelac lay dead,
and for Heardred[5] the swords of battle held
deadly slaughter under the shield-wall,
when the Battle-Scylfings sought him out,
those hardy soldiers, and savagely struck down
the nephew of Hereric in his victorious nation—
then came the broad kingdom
into Beowulf's hands; he held it well
for fifty winters—he was then a wise king,
old guardian of his homeland—until
in the dark nights a dragon began his reign,
who guarded his hoard in the high heaths
and the steep stone barrows; the path below

[1] *So the son … long despised* The reasons for ascribing to the hero an unpromising youth, elsewhere not mentioned, are not clear.

[2] *Hrethel* I.e., the father of Hygelac.

[3] *seven thousand hides of land* The "hide" is a unit of land, originally the amount of land that could support a peasant and his family; its actual size varied from one region to another. Seven thousand hides is by any measure a very generous gift.

[4] *Then it came to pass* This section is easier to follow if the reader refers to the Genealogies. The stories are told in greater detail later in the poem.

[5] *Heardred* I.e., son of Hygelac.

lay unknown to men. Some sort of man
went inside there, found his way to
the heathen hoard—his hand …
inlaid with jewels.[6] He[7] got no profit there,
though he had been trapped in his sleep
by a thief's trickery: the whole nation knew,
and all the people around them, that he was enraged.

32

Not for his own sake did he who sorely harmed him
break into that worm-hoard, or by his own will,
but in sad desperation some sort of slave[8]
of a warrior's son fled the savage lash,
the servitude of a house, and slipped in there,
a man beset by sins. Soon he gazed around
and felt the terror of that evil spirit;
yet … [9]
… made …
… when the terror seized him
he snatched a jeweled cup.
There were many such
antique riches in that earth-hall,
for in ancient days an unknown man
had thought to hide them carefully there,
the rich legacy of a noble race,
precious treasures. In earlier times
death had seized them all, and he who still survived
alone from that nation's army lingered there,
a mournful sentry, expected the same,
that he might enjoy those ancient treasures
for just a little while. A waiting barrow
stood in an open field near the ocean waves,
new on the cape, safe with crafty narrow entrances;
he bore within the noble wealth,

[6] *inlaid with jewels* The manuscript is damaged here and some text is unreadable. Among many conjectural restorations one thing is clear—a cup is taken from the dragon's hoard.

[7] *He* I.e., the thief; "he" in the following line refers to the dragon. These lines are nearly illegible, and other readings have been proposed.

[8] *slave* The word is illegible in the manuscript; the translation follows most editions.

[9] … The manuscript is unreadable at this point.

the plated gold, that guardian of rings,
a share worthy of a hoard, and spoke few words:
"Hold now, o thou earth, for heroes cannot,
the wealth of men—Lo, from you long ago
those good ones first obtained it! Death in war,
and awful deadly harm have swept away
all of my people who have passed from life,
and left the joyful hall. Now have I none
to bear the sword or burnish the bright cup,
the precious vessel—all that host has fled.
Now must the hardened helm of hammered gold
be stripped of all its trim; the stewards sleep
who should have tended to this battle-mask.
So too this warrior's coat, which waited once
the bite of iron over the crack of boards,
molders like its owner. The coat of mail
cannot travel widely with the war-chief,
beside the heroes. Harp-joy have I none,
no happy song; nor does the well-schooled hawk
soar high throughout the hall, nor the swift horse
stamp in the courtyards. Savage butchery
has sent forth many of the race of men!"

So, grieving, he mourned his sorrow,
alone after all. Unhappy sped
both days and nights, until the flood of death
broke upon his heart. An old beast of the dawn
found that shining hoard standing open—
he who, burning, seeks the barrows,
a fierce and naked dragon, who flies by night
in a pillar of fire; people on earth
fear him greatly. It is his nature to find
a hoard in the earth, where, ancient and proud,
he guards heathen gold, though it does him no good.[1]

Three hundred winters that threat to the people
held in the ground his great treasury,
wondrously powerful, until one man
made him boil with fury; he[2] bore to his liege-lord
the plated cup, begged for peace
from his lord. Then the hoard was looted,
the hoard of rings fewer, a favor was granted
the forlorn man; for the first time
his lord looked on that ancient work of men.

[1] *It is his nature … good* The association of dragons and hoarded treasure is ancient and proverbial.

[2] *he* I.e., the thief.

When the dragon stirred, strife was renewed;
he slithered along the stones, stark-hearted he found
his enemy's footprint—he had stepped too far
in his stealthy skill, too close to the serpent's head.
Thus can an undoomed man easily survive
wrack and ruin, if he holds to the Ruler's
grace and protection![3] The hoard-guardian
searched along the ground, greedy to find
the man who had sorely harmed him while he slept;
hot, half-mad, he kept circling his cave
all around the outside, but no one was there
in that wilderness to welcome his warfare
and the business of battle. Soon he returned to his barrow,
sought his treasure; he soon discovered
that some man had disturbed his gold,
his great wealth. The hoard-guardian waited
impatiently until evening came;
the barrow's shepherd was swollen with rage,
the loathsome foe would repay with fire
his precious drinking-cup. Then day was departed
to the delight of that worm; he did not linger
on the barrow wall, but took off burning
in a burst of flames. The beginning was terror
to the people on land, and to their ring-giving lord
the ending soon would be sore indeed.

33

Then that strange visitor began to spew flames
and burn the bright courts; his burning gleams
struck horror in men. That hostile flier
would leave nothing alive.
The worm's warfare was widely seen,
his ferocious hostility, near and far,
how the destroyer hated and harmed
the Geatish people, then hastened to his hoard,
his dark and hidden hall, before the break of day.
He had surrounded the people of that region with fire,
flames and cinders; he took shelter in his barrow,
his walls and warfare—but that trust failed him.

To Beowulf the news was quickly brought

[3] *Thus can … protection* This is the narrator's version of Beowulf's comment at lines 572–73.

of that horror—that his own home,
best of buildings, had burned in waves of fire,
the gift-throne of the Geats. To the good man that was
painful in spirit, greatest of sorrows;
the wise one believed he had bitterly offended
the Ruler of all, the eternal Lord,
against the old law; his breast within groaned
with dark thoughts—that was not his custom.
The fire-dragon had razed that fortress,
the folk-stronghold, with searing flames
within and without; for that the war-king,
prince of the Weders, devised revenge.
Then the lord of men bade them make,
protector of warriors, a wondrous war-shield,
all covered with iron; he understood well
that wood from the forest would not help him,
linden against flames. The long-good nobleman
had to endure the end of his loaned days,
this world's life—and so did the worm,
though he had held for so long his hoarded wealth.
Then that prince of rings scorned to seek out
the far-flung flier with his full force of men,
a large army; he did not dread that attack,
nor did he worry much about the dragon's warfare,
his strength or valor, because he had survived
many battles, barely escaping alive
in the crash of war, after he had cleansed,
triumphant hero, the hall of Hrothgar,
and crushed Grendel and his kin in combat,
that loathsome race.
It was not the least
of hand-to-hand combats when Hygelac was slain;
in the chaos of battle, the king of the Geats,
the lord of his people, in the land of the Frisians,
the son of Hrethel, died sword-drunk,
beaten by blades. Beowulf escaped from there
through his own strength, took a long swim;
he had in his arms the battle-armor
of thirty men, when he climbed to the cliffs.
By no means did the Hetware[1] need to exult
in that fight, when they marched on foot to him,
bore their linden shields; few came back
from that brave soldier to seek their homes.

[1] *Hetware* I.e., a Frankish tribe apparently on the side of the Frisians.

The son of Ecgtheow crossed the vast sea,
wretched, solitary, returned to his people,
where Hygd offered him the hoard and kingdom,
rings and royal throne; she did not trust
that her son could hold the ancestral seat
against foreign hosts, now that Hygelac was dead.
But despite their misery, by no means
could they prevail upon that prince at all
that he should become lord over Heardred,
or choose to rule the kingdom.
Yet he upheld him[2] in the folk with friendly counsel,
good will and honors, until he was older,
and ruled the Weder-Geats.
Wretched exiles,
the sons of Ohthere,[3] sought him out across the seas;
they had rebelled against the Scylfings' ruler,[4]
the best of all the sea-kings
who dispensed treasure in the Swedish lands,
a famous king. That cost him[5] his life:
for his hospitality he took a mortal hurt
with the stroke of a sword, that son of Hygelac;
and the son of Ongentheow afterwards went
to seek out his home, once Heardred lay dead,
and let Beowulf hold the high throne
and rule the Geats—that was a good king.

34

In later days he[6] did not forget
that prince's fall, and befriended Eadgils
the wretched exile; across the open sea

[2] *upheld him* Beowulf upheld Heardred, as champion and in effect a kind of regent.

[3] *sons of Ohthere* I.e., Eanmund and Eadgils.

[4] *Scylfings' ruler* Onela, son of Ongentheow. Ohthere had succeeded his father Ongentheow, but after his death his brother Onela apparently seized the throne and drove the two young men Eanmund and Eadgils into exile. They take refuge at the Geatish court, for which Heardred is attacked and killed by Onela. Later Eanmund is killed by Weohstan (see section 36 below) but Eadgils, with the help of Beowulf, becomes king (section 34).

[5] *him* I.e., Heardred.

[6] *he* I.e., Beowulf, whose revenge for the death of his lord Heardred takes a curiously indirect form—he supports Eadgils' return to Sweden, where Onela is killed.

he gave support to the son of Ohthere
with warriors and weapons. He[1] wreaked his revenge
with cold sad journeys, and took the king's life.
And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived
every struggle, every terrible onslaught,
with brave deeds, until that one day
when he had to take his stand against the serpent.
Grim and enraged, the lord of the Geats
took a dozen men[2] to seek out the dragon;
he had found out by then how the feud arose,
the baleful violence; the precious vessel
had come to him through the thief's hands.
He was the thirteenth man among that troop,
who had brought about the beginning of that strife,
a sad-minded captive—wretched and despised
he led the way to that plain. He went against his will
to where he alone knew the earth-hall stood,
an underground cave near the crashing waves,
the surging sea; inside it was full
of gems and metal bands. A monstrous guardian,
eager for combat, kept his gold treasures
ancient under the ground; getting them
was no easy bargain for any man.
The battle-hardened king sat down on the cape,
then wished good health to his hearth-companions,
the gold-friend of the Geats. His heart was grieving,
restless, ripe for death—the doom was immeasurably
near
that was coming to meet that old man,
seek his soul's treasure, split asunder
his life and his body; not for long was
the spirit of that noble king enclosed in its flesh.
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"In my youth I survived many storms of battle,
times of strife—I still remember them all.
I was seven years old when the prince of treasures,
friend to his people, took me from my father;[3]
Hrethel the king held me and kept me,
gave me gems and feasts, remembered our kinship.
I was no more hated to him while he lived
—a man in his stronghold—than any of his sons,
Herebeald and Hæthcyn and my own Hygelac.
For the eldest,[4] undeservedly,
a death-bed was made by the deeds of a kinsman,
after Hæthcyn with his horn bow
struck down his own dear lord with an arrow—
he missed his mark and killed his kinsman,
one brother to another with a bloody shaft.
That was a fight beyond settling, a sinful crime,
shattering the heart; yet it had to be
that a nobleman lost his life unavenged.
"It was as sad as if an old man
should live to see his young son
ride on the gallows[5]—let him recount a story,
a sorry song, while his son hangs
a comfort only to the ravens, and he cannot,
though old and wise, offer him any help.
Each and every morning calls to mind
his son's passing away; he will not care
to wait for any other heir or offspring
in his fortress, when the first one has
tasted evil deeds and fell death.
He looks sorrowfully on his son's dwelling,
the deserted wine-hall, the windswept home,
bereft of joy—the riders sleep,
heroes in their graves; there is no harp-music,
no laughter in the court, as there had been long before.

35

"He takes to his couch and keens a lament
all alone for his lost one; all too vast to him
seem the fields and townships.
"So the protector of the Weders[6]
bore surging in his breast heartfelt sorrows

[1] *He* I.e., Eadgils.

[2] *a dozen men* Literally "one of twelve"—Beowulf, Wiglaf, and ten others. The thief who leads the way is the thirteenth man.

[3] *took me ... father* Beowulf was brought up as a noble foster-child in the royal court.

[4] *eldest* I.e., Herebeald.

[5] *It was as sad ... gallows* It is usually suggested that this is a kind of epic simile, comparing Hrethel's grief over his son's death—a death beyond the scope of vengeance—to the grief of a criminal's father, who cannot claim compensation for the execution of his son. Mitchell and Robinson suggest that this is rather a reference to a pagan practice, part of the cult of Odin, in which the body of a man who did not die in battle was ritually hanged on a gallows. If this interpretation is correct, the "old man" is Hrethel himself.

[6] *the protector of the Weders* I.e., Hrethel.

for Herebeald. He could not in any way
make amends for the feud with his murderer,
but neither could he hate that warrior
for his hostile deeds, though he was not dear to him.
Then with the sorrow which oppressed him too sorely,
he gave up man's joys, chose God's light;[1]
he left to his children his land and strongholds
—as a blessed man does—when he departed this life.

"Then there was strife between Swedes and Geats,[2]
a quarrel in common across the wide water,
hard hostility after Hrethel died,
until the sons of Ongentheow[3]
were bold and warlike, wanted no peace
over the sea, but around the Hill of Sorrows[4]
they carried out a terrible and devious campaign.
My friends and kinsmen got revenge for those
feuds and evils[5]—as it is said—
although one of them paid for it with his own life,
a hard bargain; that battle was fatal
for Hæthcyn, king of the Geats.
Then, I've heard, the next morning, one kinsman
avenged the other with the sword's edge,[6]
when Ongentheow attacked Eofor;
his battle-helm slipped, the old Scylfing
staggered, corpse-pale; Eofor's hand recalled
his fill of feuds, and did not withhold the fatal blow.

"I have paid in battle for the precious treasures
he[7] gave me, as was granted to me,
with a gleaming sword; he gave me land,
a joyous home. He had no need
to have to go seeking among the Gifthas
or the Spear-Danes or the Swedes
for a worse warrior, or buy one with his wealth;
always on foot I would go before him,
alone in the front line—and all my life
I will wage war, while this sword endures,
which before and since has served me well,
since I slew Dæghrefn, champion of the Hugas,[8]
with my bare hands in front of the whole army.
He could not carry off to the Frisian king
that battle-armor and that breast-adornment,[9]
but there in the field the standard-bearer fell,
a nobleman in his strength; no blade was his slayer,
but my warlike grip broke his beating heart,
cracked his bone-house. Now the blade's edge,
hand and hard sword, shall fight for the hoard."

Beowulf spoke, said boasting words
for the very last time: "I have survived
many battles in my youth; I will yet,
an old folk-guardian, seek out a feud
and do a glorious deed, if only that evildoer
will come out to me from his earth-hall."
Then for the last time he saluted
each of the soldiers, his own dear comrades,
brave in their helmets: "I would not bear a sword
or weapon to this serpent, if I knew any other way
I could grapple with this great beast[10]
after my boast, as I once did with Grendel;
but I expect the heat of battle-flames,
steam and venom; therefore shield and byrnie
will I have on me. From the hoard's warden
I will not flee a single foot, but for us
it shall be at the wall as *wyrd* decrees,
the Ruler of every man. My mind is firm—
I will forego boasting against this flying foe.
Wait on the barrow, protected in your byrnies,
men in war-gear, to see which of the two of us
after the bloody onslaught can better
bear his wounds. This is not your path,
nor proper for any man except me alone

[1] *God's light* I.e., he died.

[2] *strife between Swedes and Geats* This refers to a time a generation before the conflicts of Heardred, Eanmund, and Eadgils; the Swedish-Geatish feud is longstanding.

[3] *sons of Ongentheow* I.e., Ohthere and Onela.

[4] *Hill of Sorrows* A hill in Geatland, in OE *Hreosnabeorh.*

[5] *My friends ... evils* The scene of this revenge is apparently Sweden, in a place called "Ravenswood"; this battle is described again in sections 40 and 41.

[6] *one kinsman ... sword's edge* Hygelac avenged the death of Hæthcyn on his slayer Ongentheow—not directly but through his man Eofor.

[7] *he* I.e., Hygelac.

[8] *Hugas* The Hugas, like the Hetware, are Frankish tribes allied to the Frisians; the battle in question may be the same as Hygelac's fatal raid.

[9] *breast-adornment* Possibly the same as the necklace described in 1195–1214.

[10] *great beast* The OE word *ægleacan* is here used to refer to the dragon.

that he should match his strength against this monster,
do heroic deeds. With daring I shall
get that gold—or grim death
and fatal battle will bear away your lord!"

Then that brave challenger stood up by his shield,
stern under his helmet, bore his battle-shirt
under the stone-cliffs, trusted the strength
of a single man—such is not the coward's way.
He saw then by the wall—he who had survived
a great many conflicts, good in manly virtues,
the crash of battles when footsoldiers clashed—
stone arches standing, and a stream
shooting forth from the barrow; its surge
was hot with deadly flames, and near the hoard
he could not survive for very long
unburnt, for the dragon's flaming breath.
Enraged, the ruler of the Weder-Geats
let a word burst forth from his breast,
shouted starkly; the sound echoed,
resounding battle-clear under the gray stone.
Hate was stirred up—the hoard-warden recognized
the voice of a man; there was no more time
to sue for peace. First there issued
the steam of that great creature out of the stone,
hot battle-sweat; the earth bellowed.
The warrior in the barrow turned his shield-board
against the grisly stranger, lord of the Geats,
when the writhing beast's heart was roused
to seek combat. The good war-king
had drawn his sword, its edges undulled,
an ancient heirloom; each of the two
hostile ones stood in horror of the other.
He stood stout-hearted behind his steep shield,
beloved commander, when the worm coiled itself
swiftly together—he waited in his war-gear.
Then coiled, burning, slithering he came,
rushing to his fate. The shield defended well
the life and limb of the famous lord
for less time than he might have liked;
there on that day for the first time
he faced the outcome,[1] and Fate did not
grant victory in battle. The lord of the Geats
raised his hand, struck that mottled horror
with his ancient sword, so that that edge failed,
bright against the bony scales, bit less strongly
than the king of that nation needed it to do,
hard-pressed in battle. Then the barrow-warden
was more savage after that stroke,
and spit out gruesome fire; wide sprang
the battle-flames. The gold-friend of the Geats
did not boast of his glorious victories; his bare sword
failed at need, as it should never have done,
that ancient good iron. It was no easy journey
when the great offspring of Ecgtheow
had to give up ground in that place;
he was forced, against his will, to find
a place of rest elsewhere—just as every one of us
must give up these loaned days.

It was not long
until those two great creatures[2] came together again.
The hoard-guard took heart, his breast swelled with
breath
once again; he[3] suffered anguish,
trapped by flames, he who had once ruled his folk.
His comrades, hand-chosen, sons of noblemen,
did not take their stand in a troop around him
with warlike valor—they fled to the woods
and saved their lives. The spirit rose up in sorrow
in the heart of one of them; nothing can overrule
kinship at all, in one who thinks well.

[1] *for the first time ... outcome* Or "if he could have controlled the outcome for the first time."

[2] *creatures* OE *æglæcan* again, here referring to Beowulf and the dragon together.

[3] *he* I.e., Beowulf.

36

He was called Wiglaf, Weohstan's son,
a worthy shield-warrior, a prince of the Scylfings,[4]
kinsman of Ælfhere. He saw his liege-lord
suffer heat under his war-helmet;
he recalled the honors he had received from him,
the wealthy homestead of the Waegmundings,
every folk-right that his father had possessed;

[4] *a prince of the Scylfings* Wiglaf's nationality is in question—he is both a Swede and a Wægmunding (like Beowulf; see lines 2813–14). His father fought on the Swedish side in their feuds with the Geats. Tribal allegiance is more fluid than modern nationality.

he could not hold back—his hand seized
the pale linden shield, and he drew his old sword.
It was known among men as the heirloom of Eanmund,
son of Ohthere; that friendless exile
was slain in battle with the edge of that sword
by Weohstan, who brought to his kinsman
the burnished helmet, the ringed byrnie
the old giant-work sword; Onela gave to him
the war-equipment of his young kinsman,
the shining armor—he never spoke of a feud,
though he had slain his brother's son.[1]
He[2] kept that war-gear for a great many years,
the blade and byrnie, until his boy could
perform brave deeds like his father before him;
he gave him among the Geats that battle-gear,
every piece of it, when, old, he departed this life
and went forth. That was the first time
that the young warrior had to weather
the storm of battle beside his noble lord.
His courage did not melt, nor did his kinsman's legacy
weaken in war; the worm discovered that,
when they began to meet together.

Wiglaf spoke, said to his companions
many true words—he was mournful at heart—
"I remember the time that we took mead together,
when we made promises to our prince
in the beer-hall—he gave us these rings—
that we would pay him back for this battle-gear,
these helmets and hard swords, if such a need
as this ever befell him. For this he chose us from the army
for this adventure by his own will,
thought us worthy of glory, and gave me these treasures—
for this he considered us good spear-warriors,
proud helmet-wearers, even though our prince,
shepherd of his people, intended to perform
this act of courage all alone,
because he has gained the most glory among men,
reckless heroic deeds. Now the day has come
that our noble lord has need of the support
of good warriors; let us go to it,
help our warlord, despite the heat,
grim fire-terror. God knows for my part
that I would much prefer that the flames should enfold
my body alongside my gold-giving lord.
It seems wrong to me that we should bear shields
back to our land, unless we first might
finish off this foe, defend the life
of the prince of the Weders. I know full well
that he does not deserve to suffer
this torment all alone among the Geatish troop,
or fall in the struggle; now sword and helmet,
byrnie and battle-dress, shall be ours together!"
He hurried through the deadly fumes, bore his helmet
to the aid of his lord, spoke little:
"Dear Beowulf, do all well,
as in your youth you said you would,
that you would never let in your whole life
your fame decline; now firm in deeds,
single-minded nobleman, with all your strength
you must protect your life—I will support you."

After these words the worm came angrily,
terrible vicious creature, a second time,
scorched with surging flames, seeking out his enemies,
the hated men. The hot flames rolled in waves,
burned the shield to its rim; the byrnie was not
of any use to the young soldier,
but he showed his courage under his kinsman's shield,
the young warrior, when his own was
charred to cinders. Still the battle-king
remembered his glory, and with his mighty strength
swung his warblade with savage force,
so that it stuck in the skull. Nægling shattered—
the sword of Beowulf weakened at battle,
ancient and gray. It was not granted to him
that iron-edged weapons might ever
help him in battle; his hand was too strong,
he who, I am told, overtaxed every blade
with his mighty blows, when he bore to battle
a wound-hardened[3] weapon—it was no help to him at all.

Then that threat to the people for a third time,
fierce fire-dragon, remembering his feud,
rushed on the brave man, hot and bloodthirsty,

[1] *he never ... brother's son* Onela never spoke of a feud, though Weohstan had killed Onela's brother's son, for he wished him dead. As elsewhere in the poem, a sword is the reminder of both victory and vengeance.

[2] *He* I.e., Weohstan.

[3] *wound-hardened* Or "wondrously hard"; the OE text is unclear.

when he saw the chance, seized him by the neck
in his bitter jaws; he was bloodied
by his mortal wounds—blood gushed in waves.

37

Then, I have heard, in his king's hour of need
the earl[1] beside him showed his bravery,
the noble skill which was his nature.
He did not heed that head when he helped his kinsman;
that brave man's hand was burned, so that
he struck that savage foe a little lower down,
the soldier in armor, so that his sword plunged in
bejeweled and bloody, so that the fire began
to subside afterwards. The king himself
still had his wits, drew the war-dagger,
bitter and battle-sharp, that he wore in his byrnie;
the protector of the Weders carved through the worm's midsection.
They felled their foe—their force took his life—
and they both together had brought him down,
the two noble kinsmen; a thane at need,
as a man should be! But that, for the prince, was
his last work of victory, by his own will,
of worldly adventures.

When the wound
which the earth-dragon had worked on him
began to burn and swell, he soon realized
that in his breast was an evil force,
a poison welling; then the nobleman went,
still wise in thought, so that he sat
on a seat by the wall. On that work of giants he gazed,
saw how stone arches and sturdy pillars
held up the inside of that ancient earth-hall.
Then with his hands the thane, immeasurably good,
bathed with water his beloved lord,
the great prince, spattered with gore,
sated with battle, and unstrapped his helmet.
Beowulf spoke—despite his wound,
that deadly cut—he knew clearly
that his allotted life had run out,
and his joys in the earth; all gone
was his portion of days, death immeasurably near:

"Now I should wish to give my war-gear
to my son, if there had been such,
flesh of my flesh, if fate had granted me
any heir. I held this people
fifty winters; there was no folk-king,
not any of the neighboring tribes,
who dared to face me with hostile forces
or threaten attack. The decrees of fate
I awaited on earth, held well what was mine,
I sought no intrigues, nor swore many
false or wrongful oaths. For all that I may
have joy, though sick with mortal wounds,
because the Ruler of men need not reproach me
with the murder of kinsmen, when my life
quits my body. Now go quickly
to look at the hoard under the hoary stone,
dear Wiglaf, now that the worm lies dead,
sleeps with his wounds, stripped of his treasure.
Hurry, so I might witness that ancient wealth,
those golden goods, might eagerly gaze on
the bright precious gems, and I might more gently,
for that great wealth, give up my
life and lordship, which I have held so long."

38

Then swiftly, I have heard, the son of Weohstan
after these words obeyed his lord,
sick with wounds, wore his ring-net,
the woven battle-shirt, under the barrow's roof.
As he went by the seat he saw there, triumphant,
the brave young warrior, many bright jewels,
glittering gold scattered on the ground,
wonders on the walls, and the lair of that worm,
the old dawn-flier—flagons standing,
ancient serving-vessels without a steward,
their trappings all moldered; there was many a helmet
old and rusty, a number of arm-bands
with twisted ornaments.—Treasure may easily,
gold in the ground, give the slip
to any one of us: let him hide it who will![2]—

[1] *the earl* I.e., Wiglaf.

[2] *give the slip ... who will* Or "can get the better of any man—heed [these words] who will!" The OE is uncertain; the translation follows Mitchell and Robinson.

Likewise he saw an ensign, all golden,
hanging high over the hoard, greatest hand-work,
linked together with skill; light gleamed from it
so that he could see the cave's floor,
survey those strange artifacts. There was no sign
of the serpent there—a sword had finished him off.
Then the hoard in that barrow, as I've heard, was looted,
ancient work of giants, by one man alone;
he piled in his arms cups and plates,
whatever he wanted; he took the ensign too,
brightest of beacons. His aged lord's blade
—its edge was iron—had earlier harmed
the one who was protector of those treasures
for such a long time, who bore his fiery terror
flaming before the hoard, seething fiercely
in the darkest night, until he died a bloody death.

The messenger rushed out, eager to return,
burdened with treasures; he was burning to know
whether, stout-hearted, he would find still alive
the prince of the Weders, weakened by wounds,
in the place where he had left him on that plain.
Then with the treasures he found the famous prince,
his own lord, his life at an end,
all bloody; he began once more
to sprinkle water on him, until the point of a word
escaped from his breast.[1]
Old, full of grief, he looked on the gold:

"For all these treasures, I offer thanks
with these words to the eternal Lord,
King of Glory, for what I gaze upon here,
that I was able to acquire such wealth
for my people before my death-day.
Now that I have sold my old lifespan
for this hoard of treasures, they will attend[2]
to the needs of the people; I can stay no longer.
The brave in battle will bid a tomb be built
shining over my pyre on the cliffs by the sea;
it will be as a monument to my people
and tower high on Whale's Head,
so that seafarers afterwards shall call it
'Beowulf's Barrow,' when their broad ships
they drive from afar over the darkening flood."

The boldminded nobleman took from his neck
a golden circlet, and gave it to the thane,
the young spear-carrier, and the gold-covered helmet,
ring and byrnie, bid him use them well:
"You are the last survivor of our lineage,
the Waegmundings; fate has swept away
all of my kinsmen, earls in their courage,
to their final destiny; I must follow them."
That was the last word of the old warrior,
his final thought before he chose the fire,
the hot surging flames—from his breast flew
his soul to seek the judgment of the righteous.[3]

39

Then it came to pass with piercing sorrow
that the young warrior had to watch
his most precious lord fare so pitifully,
his life at an end. Likewise his slayer lay dead,
the awesome earth-dragon deprived of his life,
overcome by force. The coiled serpent
could no longer rule his hoard of rings—
edges of iron did away with him,
the hard, battle-scarred shards of the smithy,
so that the wide-flier, stilled by his wounds,
toppled to the ground near his treasure-house.
No more soaring about in the skies
at midnight, preening in his precious treasures,
showing his face—he fell to earth
through that war-commander's handiwork.
Indeed, few men on earth, no matter how strong,
could succeed at that, as I have heard tell,
though he were daring in every deed,
could rush against the reek of that venomous foe,
or rifle through that ring-hall with his hands,
if he should find a waking warden

[1] Half a line (or more?) is missing from the manuscript at this point.

[2] *they will attend* Usually translated "you [Wiglaf] will attend . . ."; the OE verb may be indicative or imperative, but it is unambiguously plural, and the imperative plural is not used elsewhere in the poem to address a single person.

[3] *the judgment of the righteous* Literally "the *dom* (fame) of the truth-fast," an ambiguous pronouncement. It is not clear whether this means that Beowulf's soul will receive the sort of judgment that a righteous soul ought to receive (and so go to Heaven), or that it will be judged by those "fast in truth" (and so go to Hell as an unbaptized pagan).

waiting in that barrow. Beowulf's share
of that royal treasure was repaid by his death—
each of them had journeyed to the end
of this loaned life.

It was not long before
the men late for battle left the woods,
those ten weak traitors all together
who had not dared to hoist their spears
when their lord of men needed them most;
now shamefaced, they carried their shields
and battle-dress to where the old man lay dead,
to stare at Wiglaf. He sat exhausted,
a foot-soldier at his lord's shoulder,
tried to rouse him with water—but it was no use.
He could not, no matter how much he wanted,
keep the life in the body of his captain,
nor change any bit of the Ruler's decree;
the judgment of God would guide the deeds
of every man, as it still does today.
Then that youth was ready with a grim rebuke
for those who had thrown away their courage.
Wiglaf spoke, son of Weohstan,
looked, sick at heart, on those unloved:

"Lo! the man who would speak the truth must say
that the lord who gave you those gifts of treasures,
the soldier's trappings you stand in there,
when often on the ale-benches he handed out
helmets and byrnies to the hall-sitters,
a lord to his followers, whatever he could find
the finest anywhere, far or near—
that all that battle-dress he absolutely
and entirely threw away, when war beset him.
Our nation's king had no need to boast
of his comrades-in-arms! But the Ruler of victories
allowed that he, alone with his blade,
might avenge himself when he needed your valor.
Only a little life-protection could I offer
him in battle, but began nevertheless
to support my kinsman beyond my own strength;
ever the worse was the deadly enemy
when I struck with my sword, a fire less severe
surging from his head. Too few supporters
thronged around our prince in his great peril.
Now the getting of treasure, the giving of swords,
and all the happy joys of your homeland,
shall end for your race; empty-handed
will you go, every man, among your tribe,
stripped of land-rights, when noblemen learn
far and wide of your flight,
your inglorious deed. Death is better
for any earl than a life of dishonor!"

40

He ordered the battle-work announced to the camp
up by the cliff's edge, where that troop of earls,
shield-bearers, sat sad-minded
all the long morning, expecting either
the final day of their dear lord
or his homecoming. He who rode up to the cape
was not at all silent with his new tidings,
but he spoke truly in the hearing of all:

"Now is the joy-giver of the Geatish people,
the lord of the Weders, laid on his deathbed,
holding a place of slaughter by the serpent's deeds;
beside him lies his life-enemy,
sick with knife-slashes; he could not with his sword
make in the monstrous beast
any kind of wound. Wiglaf sits,
Weohstan's offspring, over Beowulf,
one earl over the other, now dead;
he holds with desperate heart the watch
over friend and foe.

"Now this folk may expect
a time of trouble, when this is told
to the Franks and Frisians, and the fall of our king
becomes widespread news. The strife was begun
hard with the Hugas, after Hygelac came
traveling with his ships to the shores of Frisia,
where the Hetware attacked him in war,
advanced with valor and a vaster force,
so that the warrior in his byrnie had to bow down,
and fell amid the infantry; not at all did that lord
give treasure to his troops. Ever after that
the Merovingians have never shown us mercy.

"Nor do I expect any peace or truce
from the Swedish nation, but it has been well-known
that Ongentheow ended the life

of Haethcyn, son of Hrethel, in Ravenswood,[1]
when in their arrogant pride the Geatish people
first sought out the Battle-Scylfings.
Immediately the ancient father of Ohthere,
old and terrifying, returned the attack—
the old warrior cut down the sea-captain,[2]
rescued his wife, bereft of her gold,
Onela's mother and Ohthere's;
and then hunted down his deadly enemies
until they escaped, with some difficulty,
bereft of their lord, into Ravenswood.
With his standing army he besieged those
sword-leavings,
weary, wounded; he kept threatening woe
to that wretched troop the whole night through—
in the morning, he said, with the edge of his sword
he would gut them, and leave some on the gallows-tree
as sport for birds.[3] But for those sad-hearted men
solace came along with the sunrise,
after they heard Hygelac's horn and trumpet
sounding the charge, when the good man came
following the trail of that people's troop.

41

"The bloody swath of the Swedes and Geats,
the slaughter of men, was easily seen,
how the folk had stirred up feud between them.
That good man[4] then departed, old, desperate,
with a small band of kinsmen, sought his stronghold,
the earl Ongentheow turned farther away;
he had heard of proud Hygelac's prowess in battle,
his war-skill, and did not trust the resistance
he might muster against the seafarers' might

[1] *Nor do I ... Ravenswood* See Section 35 above. The allusive complexity of the narration of human feuds and battles is in striking contrast to the straightforward telling of the hero's battles against non-human opponents.

[2] *old warrior ... sea-captain* I.e., Ongentheow killed Hæthcyn. Hygelac is not present at this battle, but arrives later.

[3] *he would gut them ... for birds* Ongentheow may be threatening to sacrifice the corpses of his defeated enemies to a pagan god of war.

[4] *good man* I.e., Ongentheow, whose vicious hostility toward the Geats does not earn him the narrator's censure.

to defend from the wave-borne warriors his treasure,
his women and children; he ran away from there,
old, into his fortress. Then the pursuit was offered
to the Swedish people, the standard of Hygelac
overran the place of refuge,
after the Hrethlings thronged the enclosure.
There with the edge of a sword, Ongentheow,
old graybeard, was brought to bay,
so that the king of that nation had to yield
to Eofor's will. Angrily he struck;
Wulf the son of Wonred lashed at him with his weapon,
so that with his blow the blood sprang in streams
from under his hair. Yet the ancient Scylfing
was undaunted, and dealt back quickly
a worse exchange for that savage stroke,
once the ruler of that people turned around.
The ready son of Wonred could not
give a stroke in return to the old soldier,
for he had cut through the helmet right on his head
so that he collapsed, covered in blood,
fell to the ground—he was not yet fated to die,
but he recovered, though the cut hurt him.
The hardy thane of Hygelac[5] then let
his broad blade, as his brother lay there,
his ancient giant-made sword, shatter that gigantic
helmet
over the shield-wall; then the king stumbled,
shepherd of his people, mortally stricken.
"There were many there who bandaged his[6] kinsman,

quickly raised him up, when a way was clear for them,
so that they had control of that killing field.
Then one warrior plundered another,[7]
took from Ongentheow the iron byrnie,
his hard hilted sword and his helmet too,
and carried the old man's armor to Hygelac.
He[8] took that war-gear and promised him gifts
among his people—and he kept that promise;
the king of the Geats repaid that carnage,
the offspring of Hrethel, when he made it home,

[5] *thane of Hygelac* I.e., Eofor, Wulf's brother.

[6] *his* I.e., Eofor's.

[7] *one warrior plundered another* I.e., Eofor plundered Ongentheow.

[8] *He* I.e., Hygelac.

gave to Eofor and Wulf extravagant treasures,
gave them each lands and locked rings,
worth a hundred thousand.[1] Not a man in this world
could
reproach those rewards, since they had won them with
their deeds;
and to Eofor he gave his only daughter,
the pride of his home, as a pledge of his friendship.
"That is the feud and the fierce enmity,
savage hatred of men, that I expect now,
when the Swedish people seek us out
after they have learned that our lord
has perished, who had once protected
his hoard and kingdom against all hostility,
after the fall of heroes, the valiant Scyldings,[2]
worked for the people's good, and what is more,
performed noble deeds. Now we must hurry
and look upon our people's king,
and go with him who gave us rings
on the way to the pyre. No small part
of the hoard shall burn with that brave man,
but countless gold treasures, grimly purchased,
and rings, here at last with his own life
paid for; then the flames shall devour,
the fire enfold—let no warrior wear
treasures for remembrance, nor no fair maiden
have a ring-ornament around her neck,
but sad in mind, stripped of gold, she must
walk a foreign path, not once but often,
now that leader of our troop has laid aside laughter,
his mirth and joy. Thus many a cold morning
shall the spear be grasped in frozen fingers,
hefted by hands, nor shall the sound of the harp
rouse the warriors, but the dark raven,
greedy for carrion, shall speak a great deal,
ask the eagle how he fared at his feast

[1] *a hundred thousand* A monetary unit, though it is not clear which one.

[2] *Scyldings* The manuscript reading ("Scyldings" is a further object of "protected") is often emended to *Scylfingas*, i.e., Swedes, or *scildwigan* "shield-warriors"; the present reading is that of Mitchell and Robinson. As it stands in the manuscript, the Geatish herald is referring to Beowulf's earlier adventures against Grendel and his mother.

when he plundered corpses with the wolf."[3]
Thus that brave speaker was speaking
a most unlovely truth; he did not lie much
in words or facts. The troop of warriors arose;
they went, unhappy, to the Cape of Eagles,
with welling tears to look at that wonder.
There on the sand they found the soulless body
of the one who gave them rings in earlier times
laid out to rest; the last day
had come for the good man, when the war-king,
prince of the Weders, died a wondrous death.
But first they saw an even stranger creature,
a loathsome serpent lying on the plain
directly across from him; grim with his colors
the fire-dragon was, and scorched with his flames.
He was fifty feet long, lying there
stretched out; once he had joy in the air
in the dark night, and then down he would go
to seek his den, but now he was fast in death;
he had come to the end of his cave-dwelling.
Cups and vessels stood beside him,
plates lay there and precious swords,
eaten through with rust, as if in the bosom of the earth
they had lain for a thousand winters;
all that inheritance was deeply enchanted,
the gold of the ancients was gripped in a spell
so that no man in the world would be able to touch
that ring-hall, unless God himself,
the true King of Victories, Protector of men,
granted to whomever He wished to open the hoard,
to whatever person seemed proper to Him.[4]

42

Then it was plain that the journey did not profit
the one[5] who had wrongfully hidden under a wall
that great treasure. The guardian had slain

[3] *the dark raven ... the wolf* The eagle, wolf, and raven, the "beasts of battle," are a recurring motif in Old English poetry.

[4] *unless God himself ... proper to Him* The power of the pagan spell can be overruled by the will of the true God.

[5] *the one* I.e., the dragon.

that one and few others;[1] then that feud was
swiftly avenged. It is a wonder to say
where a valiant earl should meet the end
of his span of life, when he may no longer
dwell in the mead-hall, a man with his kinsmen.
So it was with Beowulf, when he sought the barrow's guardian
and a hostile fight; even he did not know
how his parting from life should come to pass,
since until doomsday mighty princes had deeply
pronounced, when they placed it there,
that the man who plundered that place would be
harried by hostile demons, fast in hellish bonds,
grievously tortured, guilty of sins,
unless the Owner's grace had earlier
more readily favored the one eager for gold.[2]
Wiglaf spoke, son of Weohstan:
"Often many earls must suffer misery
through the will of one man, as we have now seen.
We could not persuade our dear prince,
shepherd of a kingdom, with any counsel,
that he should not greet that gold-guardian,
let him lie there where he long had been,
inhabit the dwellings until the end of the world:
he held to his high destiny. The hoard is opened,
grimly gotten; that fate was too great
which impelled the king of our people thither.
I was in there, and looked over it all,
the hall's ornaments, when a way was open to me;
by no means gently was a journey allowed
in under that earth-wall. In eager haste I seized
in my hands a great mighty burden
of hoard-treasure, and bore it out hither
to my king. He was still conscious then,
thoughtful and alert; he spoke of many things,
an old man in his sorrow, and ordered that I greet you;
he asked that you build a great high barrow
for your prince's deeds, in the place of his pyre,
mighty and glorious, since he was of men
the most worthy warrior throughout the wide world,
while he could enjoy the wealth of a hall.
Let us now make haste for one more time
to see and seek out that store of cunning gems,
the wonder under the wall; I will direct you
so that you can inspect them up close,
abundant rings and broad gold. Let the bier be ready,
quickly prepared, when we come out,
then let us bear our beloved lord,
that dear man, to where he must long
rest in the keeping of the Ruler."
Then the son of Weohstan, brave battle-warrior,
let it be made known to many heroes
and householders, that they should bring from afar
the wood for the pyre to that good one,[3]
the leader of his folk: "Now the flames must devour,
the black blaze rise over the ruler of warriors,
who often awaited the showers of iron
when the storm of arrows hurled from bow-strings
shot over the wall, the shafts did their duty
swift on feather-wings, sent on the arrow-heads."
Lo, then the wise son of Weohstan
summoned from that host some of the best
of the king's thanes, seven altogether;
he went, one of eight, under that evil roof;
one of the brave warriors bore in his hands
a flaming torch, and went before them.
It was not chosen by lots who should loot that hoard,[4]
once the men saw it sitting in the hall,
every part of it unprotected,
lying there wasting; there was little lament
that they should have to hurry out with
the precious treasures. They also pushed the dragon,
the worm over the cliff-wall, let the waves take him,
the flood embrace the guard of that finery;
then the twisted gold, an uncountable treasure,
was loaded in a wagon, and the noble one was carried,
the gray-haired warrior, to the Cape of Whales.

[1] *that one and few others* Or "that one of a few," i.e., "a unique man" or "a man of rare greatness."

[2] *favored the one eager for gold* The OE text is corrupt and the precise meaning of this passage is not certain; the present translation tries to incorporate several suggested interpretations. The general sense seems to be clear enough—the gold was cursed, and only God's special grace would enable anyone to remove it. What this implies about Beowulf's failure, and his moral status, is less clear.

[3] *that good one* I.e., the dead Beowulf.

[4] *It was not chosen ... hoard* I.e., everybody had a share; there was enough for all.

43

The people of the Geats then prepared for him
a splendid pyre upon the earth,
hung with battle-shields and helmets
and bright byrnies, as he had bidden;
there in the middle they laid the mighty prince,
the heroes lamenting their dear lord.
Then the warriors kindled there on the cliff
the greatest of funeral pyres; dark over the flames
the woodsmoke rose, the roaring fire
mingled with weeping—the wind lay still—
until it had broken that bone-house
hot at the heart. With heavy spirits
they mourned their despair, the death of their lord;
and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,[1]
with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,
with sad cares, earnestly said
that she dreaded the hard days ahead,
the times of slaughter, the host's terror,
harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.
Then the Weder people wrought for him
a barrow on the headland; it was high and broad,
visible from afar to sea-voyagers,
and in ten days they built the beacon
of that battle-brave one; the ashes of the flames
they enclosed with a wall, as worthily
as the most clever of men could devise it.
In the barrow they placed rings and bright jewels,
all the trappings that those reckless men
had seized from the hoard before,
let the earth hold the treasures of earls,
gold in the ground, where it yet remains,
just as useless to men as it was before.
Then round the mound rode the battle-brave men,
offspring of noblemen, twelve in all,
they wished to voice their cares and mourn their king,
utter sad songs and speak of that man;
they praised his lordship and his proud deeds
judged well his prowess. As it is proper
that one should praise his lord with words,
should love him in his heart when the fatal hour comes,
when he must from his body be led forth,
so the men of the Geats lamented
the fall of their prince, those hearth-companions;
they said that he was of all the kings of the world
the mildest of men and the most gentle,
the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame.
—?8TH–10TH CENTURY (EARLY 11TH CENTURY MANUSCRIPT)

[1] *Geatish woman* The manuscript is damaged throughout this section, and the readings in this passage are conjectural; it is not clear who the "Geatish woman" is, though her advanced age is indicated by her bound-up hair. Typically, in Germanic poetry, it is women (and poets) who mourn.

IN CONTEXT

Background Material

Glossary of Proper Names

Abel slain by his brother **Cain**; the story is told in Genesis 4.1–16

Ælfhere kinsman of **Wiglaf**

Æschere a prominent Dane, advisor to **Hrothgar**; slain by Grendel's mother

Battle-Scylding see **Scyldings**

Battle-Scylfing see **Scylfings**

Beanstan father of **Breca**

Beowulf (prologue) Danish king, son of **Scyld**

Breca engaged in a youthful swimming contest with Beowulf

Bright-Danes see **Danes**

Brondings the people of **Breca**

Brosings (= Old Norse Brísings) makers of the magical necklace of Freya in Norse myth, to which a necklace in the story is compared

Cain slayer of **Abel** in Genesis 4.1–16; father of the race of monsters

Dæghrefn a warrior of the **Hugas** slain by Beowulf in hand-to-hand combat during **Hygelac**'s ill-fated raid on the **Frisians**

Danes **Hrothgar**'s people; the **Scyldings**; also called Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, East-, West-, North-, and South-Danes

Eadgils son of **Ohthere**, brother of **Eanmund**

Eanmund son of **Ohthere**, brother of **Eadgils**; slain by **Weohstan**

East-Danes see **Danes**

Ecglaf father of **Unferth**

Ecgtheow father of Beowulf

Ecgwala a Danish king; the "sons of Ecgwala" are the **Danes**

Eofor a warrior of the **Geats**; brother of **Wulf**; slayer of **Ongentheow**; son-in-law of **Hygelac**

Eomer son of **Offa**

Eormanric king of the Ostrogoths

Eotens unclear: perhaps the **Jutes**, perhaps the **Frisians**, perhaps "giants" (the literal meaning of the word) as a nickname for one group or the other

Finn king of the **Frisians**, husband of **Hildeburh**; killed by **Hengest**

Finns the people of Finland; the Lapps

Fitela legendary companion, nephew (and son) of **Sigemund**

Folcwalda father of **Finn**

Franks a Germanic tribe; see **Hetware**, **Hugas**, **Merovingians**

Freawaru daughter of **Hrothgar** betrothed to **Ingeld**

Frisians a Germanic tribe; **Finn**'s people

Froda chief of the **Heathobards**, father of **Ingeld**

Garmund father of **Offa**

Geats **Hygelac**'s people and Beowulf's; a Germanic tribe; also called War-Geats, Hrethmen, Hrethlings, Weders

Gifthas an East Germanic tribe

Grendel descendent of **Cain**; monstrous marauder of the **Danes**

Guthlaf a Danish warrior, companion of **Hengest**

Hæreth father of **Hygd**

Hæthcyn Geatish prince, second son of **Hrethel**

Half-Danes see **Danes**

Halga Danish prince, younger brother of **Hrothgar**

Hama legendary Goth; stole **Brosings**' necklace

Healfdene king of the **Danes**, father of **Hrothgar**

Heardred king of the **Geats**, son of **Hygelac**

Heathobards **Ingeld**'s people; a Germanic tribe

Heatholaf a **Wylfing** slain by **Ecgtheow**

Heathoream a Scandinavian tribe: Norwegians, more or less

Helmings the family of **Wealhtheow**

Hemming kinsman of **Offa** and **Eomer**

Hengest leader of the **Danes**; killed **Finn** in **Frisia**

Heorogar Dane, eldest brother of **Hrothgar**

Heorot the great hall of **Hrothgar**

Heoroweard Dane; son of **Heorogar**

Herebeald Geatish prince, eldest son of **Hrethel**; killed by his brother **Hæthcyn**

Heremod king of the **Danes** in the poem's distant past, before the Scylding dynasty; he came to a bad end

Hereric brother of **Hygd**, uncle of **Heardred**

Hetware a Frankish tribe, allied with the **Frisians**; fought against **Hygelac**

Hildeburh sister of the Danish **Hnæf**, wife of the Frisian **Finn**

Hnæf chief of the **Half-Danes**, brother of **Hildeburh**; killed by Finn

Hoc Dane, father of **Hildeburh** and **Hnæf**

Hondscio Geatish warrior, comrade of Beowulf; slain by **Grendel**

Honor-Scyldings see **Scyldings**

Hrethel king of the **Geats**, father of **Hygelac**, grandfather of Beowulf

Hrethlings sons of **Hrethel**, i.e., the **Geats**

Hrethmen the **Geats**

Hrethric Dane, son of **Hrothgar**

Hrothgar aged king of the **Danes** beset by **Grendel**; helped by Beowulf

Hrothmund Dane, son of **Hrothgar**

Hrothulf Dane, son of **Halga**, nephew of **Hrothgar**; not to be trusted

Hrunting the sword of **Unferth**

Hugas the **Franks**, allies of the **Frisians**

Hunlaf father of one of the warriors in **Hengest**'s troop

Hygd queen of the **Geats**, wife of **Hygelac**, daughter of **Hæreth**

Hygelac king of the **Geats**, uncle of Beowulf

Ingeld prince of the **Heathobards**, son of **Froda**, betrothed to **Freawaru**; after the events narrated in the poem he presumably burns down the great hall of **Heorot**

Ingwines the "friends of Ing": the **Danes**

Jutes allies of the **Frisians**; see **Eotens**

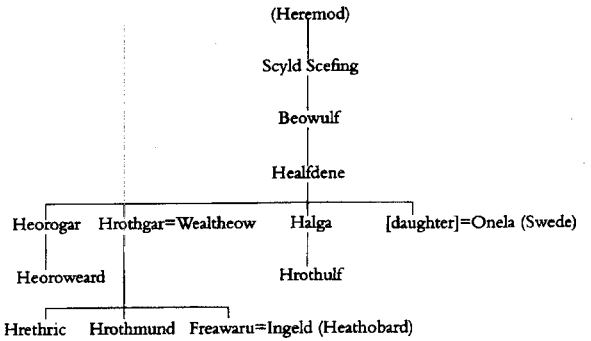
Merovingians the **Franks**

Nægling Beowulf's sword

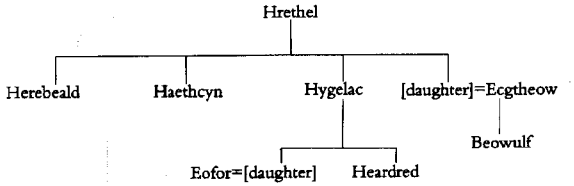
North-Danes	see **Danes**
Offa	king of the Angles, husband of **Thryth**
Ohthere	Swede, son of **Ongentheow**
Onela	Swede, son of **Ongentheow**; usurped throne
Ongentheow	Swedish king; killed by **Wulf** and **Eofor**
Oslaf	a Danish warrior, companion of **Hengest**
Ring-Danes	see **Danes**
Scyld Scefing	legendary founder of the Danish royal family
Scyldings	the Danes; also called Battle-, Honor-, Victory-Scyldings
Scylfings	the Swedes
Sigemund	legendary Germanic hero, son of **Wæls**
South-Danes	see **Danes**
Spear-Danes	see **Danes**
Swerting	uncle of **Hygelac**
Thryth	(often construed as Modthryth) wife of **Offa**
Unferth	Danish spokesman ("thyle") and courtier of **Hrothgar**
Victory-Scyldings	see **Scyldings**
Volsung	another name for **Sigemund**, son of **Wæls**
Waegmundings	the family of **Weohstan**, **Wiglaf**, and Beowulf
Wæls	father of **Sigemund**
War-Geats	see **Geats**
Wealhtheow	Danish queen, wife of **Hrothgar**
Weders	the **Geats**
Weland	legendary Germanic smith
Wendels	a Germanic tribe; perhaps the Vandals, perhaps not
Weohstan	father of **Wiglaf**; killed **Eanmund**
West-Danes	see **Danes**
Wiglaf	son of **Weohstan**, young retainer of Beowulf
Withergyld	a dead **Heathobard**
Wonred	a Geat, father of **Wulf** and **Eofor**
Wulf	a warrior of the **Geats**, brother of **Eofor**; assisted in killing **Ongentheow**
Wulfgar	a warrior of the **Danes**; herald at the court of **Hrothgar**
Wylfings	a Germanic tribe of which **Heatholaf** was a member, until Ecgtheow killed him
Yrmenlaf	a Dane, younger brother of **Æschere**

Genealogies

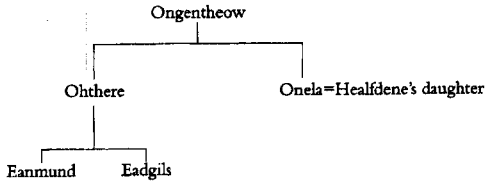
1. The Danes (Scyldings)



2. The Geats



3. The Swedes (Scylfings)



The Geatish-Swedish Wars

When the story of Beowulf's fight with the dragon begins, the narrator leaps over fifty years in one brief passage. It is a tumultuous condensation of a complex chain of events (2200–08):

> Then it came to pass amid the crash of battle
> in later days, after Hygelac lay dead,
> and for Heardred the swords of battle held
> deadly slaughter under the shield-wall,
> when the Battle-Scylfings sought him out,
> those hardy soldiers, and savagely struck down
> the nephew of Hereric in his victorious nation—
> then came the broad kingdom
> into Beowulf's hands;

These events are referred to throughout the last thousand lines of the poem, but they are not told in a straightforward way or in chronological order. The fortunes of the Geatish royal house may be reconstructed as follows:

1. Hæthcyn accidentally kills his brother Herebeald; their father Hrethel dies of grief (2432–71). Hæthcyn becomes king of the Geats.

2. After the death of Hrethel, Ohthere and Onela, the sons of the Swedish king Ongentheow, attack the Geats (2472–78).

3. In retaliation, Hæthcyn attacks Ongentheow in Sweden (2479–84); at first he is successful, but he is later killed at Ravenswood (2922–41). Hygelac's men Wulf and Eofor kill Ongentheow, and Hygelac (Hæthcyn's brother) is victorious (2484–89, 2942–99). Hygelac becomes king of the Geats; Ohthere becomes king of the Swedes.

4. Hygelac is killed in Frisia; his son Heardred becomes king of the Geats (2354–78).

5. Ohthere's brother Onela seizes the Swedish throne and drives out the sons of Ohthere, Eanmund and Eadgils (2379–84). Heardred takes in these exiles, and Onela attacks Heardred for this hospitality and kills him. Onela allows Beowulf to rule the Geats (2385–90).

6. Around this time Weohstan, father of Wiglaf, kills Eanmund on behalf of Onela (2611–19).

7. Eadgils escapes, later to kill Onela in Sweden, with help sent by Beowulf (2391–96); he presumably becomes king of the Swedes.

8. During Beowulf's fifty-year reign, the death of Eanmund is unavenged. After Beowulf's death, Eanmund's brother Eadgils will probably seek vengeance against Wiglaf, son of Weohstan (2999–3005).